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ACADEMY'S SECOND SEAT

– 아카데미 차석이 되었다 –

- VOLUME 5 -

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[RAEI TRANSLATIONS]

CHAPTER 203
FINAL EXAM 2 (1)

After the battle with Jefrin ended, I was able to return to the academy with Mcguire's help.

Fortunately, I wasn't severely injured, so there was no need for a hospital stay.

The problem was that my senses weren't returning quickly.

I heard that Astina and Priscilla, who suffered the same technique from Jefrin, recovered their senses quickly, but mine were slow to return.

According to the doctor, it varies from person to person, so some may recover slowly.

However, the good news was that it wasn't all my senses that failed to return; it was just my vision that was somewhat unclear.

Of course, not being able to see properly has its inconveniences, but I was better off than some.

"Hmm…"

Luna looked at me with a face full of dissatisfaction.

"…What's wrong?"

"I came to take care of you, so don't use that thing and just let me support you…!"

"…Then you'll have a hard time."

"Still…"

I didn't feel the need to be supported, even though I couldn't see well.

A technique I realized while fighting Jefrin.

I was able to share senses with Priscilla.

With Priscilla's vision, I could figure out what was around me, so even though I couldn’t see, everyday life wasn't a problem.

Thus, I used Priscilla like a guide dog.

"Just help me with the notes or something. Priscilla often dozes off during class, so I can't take notes properly."

"I don't need to attend such classes, do I?"

The semester hadn't ended yet.

Final exams were coming up, and I had to prepare.

Already having lost the top rank to Yeniel in the joint assessment, there was a risk of losing the top overall score.

In this situation where I couldn’t see properly, I couldn’t afford to neglect my studies.

"Okay… I'll take care of the notes."

"Shall we go to class?"

"Yeah!"

We were about to head to class.

"Ah?"

That's when I tripped over a step I hadn't seen.

Thud—

Caught off guard by the unexpected step, I stumbled forward, hitting my head against the wall.

"Ow…!"

I rubbed my head where it had hit the wall.

"Rudy! Are you okay?"

"Oh no, sorry, Rudy."

“…It's okay, it happens."

Even though I could see through Priscilla's eyes, I couldn't see every blind spot, like this step.

Luna glared at me, rubbing the bump on my head.

"See? That's what happens when you don't take my support."

"It's not… like this happens often."

Then Luna grabbed me.

She draped my arm over her shoulder, assuming a supporting posture.

"Just do as I say!"

“…Okay."

I gave in to Luna's firm attitude.

There was one reason why I was reluctant to be supported like this.

“…Gasp."

"Are those two… Rudy and Luna?"

Murmurs from the crowd.

With a white wolf leading the way and Luna clinging to me, all eyes were on us.

Being the center of attention was already a given for me, so it was inevitable that rumors would spread in such a situation.

"Are the two of you… dating?"

"Well, it's only natural… someone like Rudy would have a girlfriend."

"And come to think of it, Luna is always with Rudy."

I silently walked past the people making such comments.

Indeed, I didn't care much about the words of those I didn't know.

The problem lay elsewhere.

"Ruuuuudyyyyy?"

A blonde woman approached, squinting her eyes in annoyance.

Rie was glaring at me, veins popping on her forehead.

She looked back and forth between Luna and me.

"You said you could see with Priscilla's help, right? How?"

"…I can see, sort of."

"Priscilla can't see everything, so I'm helping him!"

Luna said proudly.

Her assertive stance made Rie glare at me more intensely.

"Rudy??? You told me you didn't need any help, but you need Luna's help?"

"Ah… no, there seems to be a misunderstanding…"

Then Luna pressed herself closer to me, as if protecting me.

"No, it's not Rudy's fault! He was walking so unsteadily, I had to help him."

A scenario where the interfering sister-in-law is more annoying than the scolding mother-in-law.

Luna's explanation only sharpened Rie's gaze.

"Then I'll help him."

“…What?"

Rie suddenly clung to my side.

"Gasp!"

"Hey, playing both sides?"

As Rie pressed against me, the onlookers grew more agitated.

"Luna can't support him alone, right?"

"No, no! Rudy isn't hurt in the legs, there's no need for two people to support him!"

"Oh, is that so? Then you can go, Luna. I'll support him."

"Eek…”

Luna glared at Rie.

On my right was Luna, and on my left was Rie.

Stuck between them, glaring at each other, I was the most uncomfortable.

"I'll be the one to support him."

"For what reason. There's no need, right?"

"Re… reason. You don't have one either!"

"Yes, I do."

Rie smirked.

"I'm going to marry Rudy."

"……!!!!!!"

I was shocked at Rie's words.

We were not alone, but in a corridor filled with other students.

We were not seven years old to casually say 'I'm going to marry someone~.'

"Princess Rie is going to…"

"Is the Astria family going to be connected to the royal family?"

The surrounding students were astounded.

"Hey, you can't say that here!!"

I whispered to Rie, making sure no one else could hear.

We had agreed not to discuss such matters carelessly anywhere.

Discussing something as serious as marriage in the academy could lead to nothing good.

I was worried about how far the rumors circulating here might spread, possibly even reaching the capital.

"Why? You lied to me, so this is your punishment."

"It's not a lie, I tell you."

Then Luna clenched her fist and spoke up.

"I'm going to marry Rudy, too."

She said this, her face turning beet red.

"Ah…"

The attention from those around us was pouring in.

Even though I was using Priscilla's vision to look around, I could feel their gazes, a mix of admiration and disdain.

Men looked at me with a mix of respect, while women regarded me as if I were trash.

"Cough…"

I coughed awkwardly and pondered.

I needed to find a way to resolve this situation.

"…What are you seniors doing?"

At that moment, Yuni slowly emerged from the crowd.

Rie waved her hand at Yuni.

"Ah, Yuni, perfect timing. Say hello to your future brother-in-law."

"…Brother-in-law?"

Yuni looked at Rie, confused.

"No! Yuni! You mustn't call him that!"

Luna reacted vehemently.

"Why not, Yuni? Hurry and greet him."

"Yuni, don't do it!"

"It's my brother, he should listen to me, right?"

"What are you both doing…"

Yuni sighed and looked at them.

"There are too many people here. Let's go somewhere else."

"Yes, Yuni is right."

I was impressed by Yuni's sensible reaction, quite a change from the days when she would blurt out strange confessions to me.

We followed Yuni to the student council room.

"So… you were fighting over who would support Rudy?"

Yuni looked at us with a deadpan expression.

"It wasn't exactly because of that, more like a combination of…"

"It's because of Luna."

Rie and Luna grumbled like scolded children in front of Yuni.

"Let's do it this way."

Yuni addressed us.

"I'll support Rudy. That should settle it, right?"

"Rudy? Why would you?"

Rie raised her voice in protest.

"If sister and Luna keep fighting over it, it'll be worse. So, it's better if I do it."

"Ah, but… uh…"

Rie hesitated, as if wanting to say something.

"You, Yuni, have classes! If you take Rudy, you'll have to go out of your way."

If Yuni escorted me to class, it would take twice as long.

She would have to take me to my class and then go to her own.

"It's not a big deal. I owe Rudy a lot, so I can do at least this much."

"But, still…"

"Alright, that's settled. Now, everyone go to class. It's almost time for them to start."

Though Luna and Rie seemed slightly displeased, they nodded.

It seemed Luna preferred Yuni over Rie and vice versa.

I also thought it was better, as it avoided any more conflicts between the two.

But what about the rumors circulating around the academy…

"Senior, shall we go?"

Yuni offered me her hand.

"Yes, okay."

"Don't tell Rudy."

"He'll find out eventually. Is there a reason to delay?"

"If he finds out, he'll surely worry. It's better to delay and lessen the worry."

Astina, dressed in a white suit, spoke to Cromwell.

"Alright, I understand. Take care."

"You too. Travel safely."

Astina waved goodbye to Cromwell as he departed in his carriage.

She watched until the carriage disappeared from her sight.

"Now, it's time to begin."

Astina didn't return to the academy with Cromwell; she stayed in the capital.

She was appointed as the Deputy Commander of the Royal forces against the Rebels.

The reason Astina, young and still not graduated from the academy, was given such a role was due to her achievements reported at the meeting.

She had captured Rebels, a first at the academy, and had represented central nobility in the North.

Her detailed explanation about the Rebels at the recent meeting had earned her respect, leading to her appointment as Deputy Commander.

This position was exactly what Astina had aimed for.

With Jefrin's execution drawing the Rebels' attention to her, they would try to do something about Astina.

But as long as she sat in the Deputy Commander's seat, she would be safe.

To target Astina in her role as Deputy Commander would mean challenging the entire Royal army.

'It's time to start.'

Astina walked towards a mansion.

A mansion where lilies bloomed in all seasons.

"It's been a while. Ian Astria."

"Is this the first time since last year at the academy?"

It was the Astria family mansion.

CHAPTER 204
FINAL EXAM 2 (2)

Ian and Astina sat across from each other, facing one another.

Astina was the first to speak.

"I regret the outcome of the last meeting."

The content of the meeting held in the central region.

The discussion revolved around Rudy and Ian, primarily focusing on whether Ian should be the uncontested successor.

The conclusion of the meeting granted Rudy a chance to compete, considering his achievements thus far.

Ian narrowed his eyes as he looked at Astina.

"Do you really regret it?"

Everyone knew of Astina's close relationship with Rudy.

So, it seemed absurd to Ian that Astina was expressing regret.

Of course, Astina wasn't actually regretful.

Why would she express regret when Rudy had just been given a chance to inherit the family?

But she had her reasons for saying so.

"I spoke as a colleague with a common goal."

Ian had been appointed as the Commander of the Royal forces against the Rebels.

Although young to be a Commander, Ian had been a promising figure from his academy days, receiving much expectation from the Empire.

Right after graduating, he had taken over his family's affairs on behalf of his father and enjoyed overwhelming support from the nobility faction.

Ian was old enough and deserving of such a position.

Though Ian as the Commander and Astina as the Deputy Commander might seem like a weak combination, the Royal army was full of veteran nobles, not necessarily involved in frontline battles.

Ian nodded without much change in expression.

"Alright, let's go with that. Now, shall we get to the main point?"

Ian spread a map in front of Astina.

"It seemed like you knew a lot about the Rebels last time. I'd like to hear what you think should be done?"

Astina looked at Ian.

His eyes didn't seem to be testing her; he genuinely seemed curious.

Though they might become enemies later, for now, they were allies.

Just as the saying goes, 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend,' Ian and Astina shared a common enemy in the Rebels.

Collaboration was necessary.

"Then let me explain."

Rudy, wearing glasses, sat at his desk.

He turned his head while studying.

Behind Rudy was Yuni sitting.

"Aren't you supposed to study too?"

Yuni had spread her study books in front of her but was only staring at Rudy.

Rudy wondered why she was behaving like this.

Yuni shrugged nonchalantly.

"I can study here, too."

"Still, your concentration must be different when we're together compared to when you're alone."

It had been a few days since Yuni decided to assist Rudy.

Rudy's vision had improved enough to see clearly with his glasses, yet Yuni continued to stay close by his side.

Even though Rudy insisted he was fine, Yuni ignored it and kept visiting him.

"After the joint assessment, I heard the final exams are going to be easy anyway."

"True, but with relative grading, we still need to study hard. Besides, isn’t Professor Gracie suffering because you’re here with me?"

Professor Gracie's lab had been struggling since the last performance report, even with a few teaching assistants.

It was time to start new research, and with both Rudy and Yuni absent, Professor Gracie was having a hard time.

Talking to Yuni about it seemed pointless; she did as she pleased, and Rudy couldn’t scold in his condition.

"Next year, when you're in your third year, we won’t be around anymore, so Professor Gracie should start preparing for that."

Yuni's comment wasn't entirely wrong.

Professor Gracie should be able to conduct research without Rudy and Yuni soon.

Rudy was slated for social practice outside the academy next year.

As for Yuni, who had been reluctantly brought into the lab by Rudy, it was time for her to leave as well.

She wasn’t planning on pursuing a research career, so staying in the lab wasn’t feasible.

"That reminds me, other students must be worrying about their career paths too."

Rudy mused, taking off his glasses.

Yuni frowned at this.

"Put your glasses back on, senior."

Rudy, puzzled by her sudden request, asked,

"Glasses?"

"Once your vision fully recovers, you won’t need to wear glasses anymore. Enjoy wearing them while you can."

Rudy was bewildered by her reasoning.

"What are you talking about?"

"It’s a rare sight to see you with glasses. I want to see it more,"

Yuni explained.

"So, you just want to see it?"

Rudy didn’t understand the appeal of his glasses but decided to go along with Yuni's request.

As Rudy put his glasses back on, Yuni began smiling broadly.

"Senior, you actually look pretty good with glasses, you know?"

"Thanks, I guess,"

Rudy replied, feeling a bit awkward.

He then reflected on his earlier thought about others' future paths.

Rie was destined for the throne, and Locke would likely take over his family's responsibilities in the north.

Rudy's thoughts then drifted to Luna.

The Railer family that Luna belonged to was relatively insignificant, just a small territory in the countryside.

It seemed more beneficial for her to focus on becoming a wizard rather than on inheritor training.

As Rudy contemplated the futures of those around him, another person came to mind.

"By the way, I haven't seen Astina around lately,"

Rudy remarked.

He hadn't seen Astina since the Jefrin incident, and with no rumors circulating, he assumed she was just busy with her own matters, especially with graduation preparations underway.

"Astina?"

Yuni questioned.

"Yeah, what's Astina up to these days? Still training like before?"

Rudy hadn't heard anything significant from Luna or Rie either, just that Astina was busy.

"Senior, haven't you heard the news?"

"News?"

"Astina has been appointed as the Deputy Commander of the Royal Army against the Rebels. It seems she might not even be able to attend the graduation ceremony."

Rudy's eyes widened in surprise at this new information.

"What are you talking about?"

"You really didn't know?"

After losing his senses, Rudy hadn't wandered around and mostly met with Luna, Rie, and Yuni.

Since no one mentioned it, Rudy had no way of knowing.

"Astina, suddenly…"

Rudy sank into deep thought.

He had always been concerned about Astina.

He remembered seeing her death in the future when he became a third-year student during the winter break.

Reducing and checking the Rebels' power was his attempt to prevent that future.

Learning that Astina was now directly confronting the Rebels caused him a lot of concern.

"Yuni, do you know how the Royal Army plans to move, anything about that?"

"No, I don't know that much. That kind of information is confidential."

"Right…"

Astina was a thoughtful person.

There must be a plan behind her actions, but Rudy couldn't completely let go of his concerns.

"I need to go there right after the final exams."

"Where to?"

"To the capital, of course."

Mobilizing the Royal Army to respond to the Rebels wouldn't happen immediately.

Soldiers had to be conscripted, and strategies had to be planned.

Astina would likely remain in the capital during this time.

Rudy was determined to help Astina in any way he could.

"I'll have to wrap up the student council work quickly then."

Though the student council term officially ended after the final exams, Rudy needed to conclude other matters to head to the capital with peace of mind.

He had to go there anyway for his third-year, but he planned to make that trip sooner.

"Senior going to the capital…"

While Rudy was pondering, Yuni also seemed lost in thought.

Knock, knock.

At that moment, they heard a knock at the door.

Rudy tilted his head, puzzled.

There were no classes scheduled for the afternoon, and he was studying in the dormitory.

Other students and professors should be in class, so he couldn't think of anyone who might visit.

"Who is it?"

Rudy's question was met with a voice from outside the door.

"From the Royal Palace. Is Rudy Astria present?"

A voice asked from outside the door.

"The Royal Palace?"

Rudy quickly opened the door, curious.

Standing before him was a person clad in a formal uniform, clearly a knight, evident by the sword at his waist.

A companion, appearing to be an attendant, stood behind, holding a small box.

"Good day. Are you Rudy Astria?"

The knight asked.

"Yes, that's me,"

Rudy responded, prompting the knight to bow slightly.

"Greetings. I've come to deliver the results of the recent central meeting."

"The meeting results?"

"The matter concerning the heir to the Astria family."

Rudy nodded, aware of the meeting about the Astria family's succession but not particularly surprised by the visit.

"Please come in,"

Rudy invited the knight into his room.

"Ah?"

The knight appeared surprised to see Yuni sitting comfortably inside.

"Hello?"

Yuni greeted casually, waving her hand at the sight of the royal attire.

Although it might seem disrespectful to some, as a member of the Royal Family, Yuni's casual behavior towards the knight, who was essentially an attendant to the Royal Family, was not problematic.

"Oh, don't mind her. She's just here to help with some work,"

Rudy explained.

"Ahem, understood,"

The knight cleared his throat and signaled the attendant, who then placed the box in front of Rudy.

"What is this?"

"Documents containing the results of the meeting."

Upon opening the box, Rudy found a scroll of moderate size inside.

He unrolled it and began to read.

"The heir competition."

"Yes, the Royal Family wishes for you, Rudy Astria, to engage in a proper competition with your brother."

After reading through the scroll, Rudy noticed something peculiar at the end.

"Ah?"

"Have you finished reading?"

"Yes… but…"

"I will now convey the Royal Family's command."

The knight took the scroll from Rudy and stood up.

"The Royal Palace commands Rudy Astria to return to the capital upon the completion of the term and receive training in spatial magic. Following that, you are to engage in a legitimate competition for the heirship with Ian Astria."

This was the content of the scroll from the Royal Palace, instructing Rudy to learn spatial magic in the capital.

CHAPTER 205
FINAL EXAM 2 (3)

"Finally, you found out…”

Rie spoke to me with a calm face.

"I'm sorry, it was a request from Astina, so I couldn't just go about it carelessly."

“…It's okay,"

I couldn't blame Rie or Luna for not revealing something that Astina had asked to be kept secret.

Considering it was a rumor that was quite famous in the Empire, the fact that Astina tried to hide it suggested she knew I would find out eventually.

Rie patted my shoulder, which was shadowed with worry.

"There's no need to worry that much. The position of the Deputy Commander of the Royal Army isn't that dangerous."

Her words were true, but from another perspective, the Deputy Commander was the second target of the rebels.

It was a position safe yet vulnerable to threats.

The rebels would go to any lengths to capture the commander.

"I'm more worried about the people around Astina…”

Even if it wasn't Astina, those around her could be threatened.

Not just us, who had become close at the academy, but Astina's family could be targets too.

We might be safe within the academy, but Astina's family was a different story.

The Persia family, despite being a viscount family, did not possess strong powers, excluding Astina.

They weren't a family that rose through magic or swordsmanship, despite being a viscount family.

The Persia family had earned their status through administrative work.

When I visited the Persia territory last time, the enormous size of the commercial city there proved this point.

It was a commercial city more bustling than the capital.

That's why I was more worried.

From the rebels' perspective, capturing the Persia territory meant they would be ready for war in terms of supplies.

With many merchant companies there and their warehouses, it was an ideal environment to seize supplies.

"The Empire won't be unaware of this. They will probably send soldiers or wizards to protect the Persia territory."

"Right? The Empire isn't foolish enough to overlook such an important stronghold."

The Persia territory, a target for both Astina and supplies, was indeed a crucial point.

However, its distance from the capital was a concern.

Rie tapped the book in front of her.

"Worrying like this won't change anything. We can't do much right now. Focus on your studies for now. The final exams are just around the corner. Astina probably didn't tell you about her matters so that you could focus on your own. But now that you know, what are you going to do?"

I nodded at Rie's words.

“…You're right. I need to concentrate on my own tasks."

If the rebels really were planning to attack the Persia territory, the Empire would catch wind of it.

There was no harm in worrying later.

As I nodded and composed myself, Rie smiled.

"Besides, can you see well now?"

Rie waved her hand in front of my eyes.

"I can see somewhat. It's not like my old vision yet, but it should return soon."

"Hmm… Then you don't need glasses?"

"Glasses?"

"Ah, no. I heard you wear glasses when studying."

“…Were you listening to conversations in my room?"

The only time I wore glasses was in my room.

During class, I sat in the front row so there was no need to wear glasses, and when I was walking around, Yuni was always by my side, so there were no major issues.

I only wore glasses in my room when my vision was poor, and it hurt to read.

"How could I not be bothered when you say you're alone in your room with another girl?"

"Another girl? That's your sister."

"Even if she's my sister, a girl is still a girl. And Yuni has been bothering me too…”

"Yuni bothers you?"

As I tilted my head in confusion, Rie shook her head.

"No, it's not like that. Or, rather, don't you wear glasses outside?"

"No, it's uncomfortable."

"Ugh…"

Rie clicked her tongue, looking somewhat disappointed.

"What's the big deal about wearing glasses? It's not that serious."

"Usually, you want to see every aspect of someone you like."

"Ahem…"

I turned my head slightly at Rie's unexpected remark.

After a moment of thought, I glanced at my bag beside me.

"If you really want to see…"

Although I didn't wear glasses outside, I carried them just in case I needed them for something I couldn't see.

I took out the glasses case from my bag and put on the glasses.

"Wow…"

Rie gasped in admiration when I put on the glasses.

Was there a reason to like it that much?

Yuni had a similar reaction; perhaps liking glasses was a trait in this family?

"It shouldn't make that much of a difference."

"No, it changes a lot. Your whole impression changes."

"Really? How so?"

"When you don't wear glasses, you have a bit of a delinquent vibe, but with glasses,

you look like a smart delinquent?"

"…"

That's still saying I look like a delinquent.

But I didn't intend to deny it.

Even I thought my face had a delinquent look.

With blond hair and sharp eyes, I naturally had a fierce look.

Rie leaned her chin on her hand, staring at me with a foolish smile.

"Hehe, I like the glasses."

"But you said I look like a delinquent."

"Well, that doesn't mean you are one. That's enough for me."

As Rie continued to smile and stare, I gradually felt embarrassed.

When my face started to turn red, I quickly took off the glasses.

"What, why did you take them off?"

"I showed you, that's enough."

"Show me more!!"

Ignoring Rie's tantrum, I quickly put the glasses back in their case.

"That's it. I won't show you."

"So stingy, over something like that…"

Rie glared at me, grumbling.

"By the way, why hasn't Luna come? She said she would join us."

We were in the library to study.

Although Rie had barged into this plan made by Luna, Luna, who had arranged the meeting, hadn't shown up.

"Luna is having a talking with Professor Mcguire."

"Professor Mcguire?"

"I'm not sure why. Should I find out?"

"No, it's okay. If it's important, Luna will tell us."

I said this as I looked towards the library's door.

"You still haven't submitted your career aspiration form, have you?"

"Yes…"

Professor Mcguire spoke to Luna, who was sitting in front of him.

"The semester is about to end, you need to submit it quickly. That way, the academy can decide what to do."

"Yes… I know…"

Luna, with a dejected face, fidgeted with her fingers and looked only at the floor.

"You don't need to make such a face; I'm not scolding you."

Mcguire had come to the academy after a long time and was attending to various duties.

During his work, he heard a piece of news related to Luna.

It was about Luna not submitting her career aspiration form.

While everyone else had already submitted theirs, Luna was the only one who

hadn't.

Mcguire had called Luna to hear her reasons.

“…I've been having a lot of concerns lately."

"Concerns?"

As soon as he heard that, Mcguire thought, 'Rudy Astria.'

In the year Luna had spent with Rudy, there weren't many times she had such concerns.

When she was in such a contemplative state and he asked her about it, she would say, 'This is about someone I know… '

She used to talk about love stories as if they weren't her own.

Mcguire thought it might be a similar story this time.

"Go ahead, tell me about it. I'll listen to everything."

Mcguire said with a kind smile.

"I don't know what to do these days… Even though our family isn't well off, I wonder if it's better to inherit it. But I also want to study more about magic."

"…”

"And even if I study magic, the problem is how and where to study… Just studying isn't feasible since our family doesn't have money…”

"I'm… sorry."

"Excuse me?"

Mcguire had assumed it would be a sweet, romantic dilemma like 'I want to be someone's wife, but how do I go about it… '

However, Luna's concerns were serious future-oriented issues that any student

might have.

Mcguire chided himself for having almost responded with a generic 'Do what your heart desires.'

He smiled with his eyes and gestured with his hand.

"No, it's okay. Continue, please."

"Yes… I know that doing what I love is best, but reality doesn't allow us to live just by doing what we love."

"That's true."

However, Luna's interests and talents coincided.

Luna's favorite and best skill in magic was constructing magic circles.

Not only did she have immense talent, but her current skills were not inferior to those of practicing wizards.

"Luna, you could continue focusing on constructing magic circles."

"But… if I do that, our family…"

"There's no need to inherit the family right away."

Mcguire smiled and patted Luna's head.

"I used to have a lot of concerns like that when I was young. But lessons in succeeding the family or managing a territory can be learned slowly. You can take over the family later. But not with studying. The younger you are when you study, the more growth you can achieve. When you get to my age and try to start something new, your body aches, and you just want to stick to what you're used to."

Although it's said that learning never stops, it's not always the right thing to do.

When you get older, your mind becomes rigid, and it's harder to accept new things.

Mcguire felt this acutely when he recently attended a conference.

He just wanted to stay at the academy comfortably, doing what he had been doing.

Even so, Mcguire had endured and stayed at the conference.

"Don't worry about money with your level of skill. Someone will want to hire you, even if it means they have to sponsor you."

He wanted to suggest that Luna stay at the academy.

If Luna stayed, she would be an extremely valuable addition to the faculty.

Many professors at the academy also came from families with territories.

A lordship could be managed by a deputy while holding a professorship.

There was no need to always be present in one's territory.

However, he couldn't make such a suggestion.

Luna wanted to see more and experience more.

Mcguire did not want to hinder Luna's growth for his own selfish reasons.

After all, Luna was his student.

It was natural for a teacher to wish for their student to grow and become a greater person.

"So, what should I do…?"

"There are many conferences in the world. There are those sponsored by private families, or you could join the Royal Wizards. But you don't need to decide right now. That's why there's an internship, to help alleviate these concerns."

"But…"

Even as Mcguire said this, Luna's expression did not brighten.

"You can do anything, Luna. I've seen that in you as my student."

Mcguire tilted his head slightly, smiling kindly.

"Is that an answer for you?"

"Yes… But…!"

Luna clenched her fists tightly and looked at Mcguire.

Mcguire wondered if there was some concern he was unaware of.

Despite his well-intentioned advice, it might not apply to Luna's situation.

He looked at Luna carefully, and she blurted out:

"If that happens, I'll be separated from Rudy for too long… Wouldn't it be better to receive the family education and be free to move around? I heard that conferences restrict freedom a lot…!"

She spoke passionately.

"…"

"The others go to their families for education and have the freedom to move around! What if Rudy…"

"…Luna."

"Yes?"

"Have you considered staying at the academy?"

Mcguire thought it would be better to have her educated by his side than to have her harboring such foolish thoughts.

CHAPTER 206
FINAL EXAM 2 (4)

In the academy's vice principal's office.

Cromwell sighed while going through documents.

The last image of Astina he had seen flickered before his eyes.

"Was it right to leave her like that…”

Astina was mature.

She had been sensible since she first entered the academy.

She never showed a childlike side to anyone, taking on everything alone, whether it was student council work or other matters.

Certainly, she must be carrying some burden now.

After some contemplation, she must have thought the best way to counter the rebels was to form an Royal army.

As a mentor, he had failed to notice any of his student's concerns.

Even though Astina trained alone at the academy and occasionally visited him, he hadn't noticed even the slightest hint.

Astina was undoubtedly strong.

Whether considering physical or mental strength, this conclusion wouldn't change.

However, that didn't mean Astina was invincible.

She too could feel stress and sometimes fear like any human.

Her decision to confront the nobles of the empire and stand against the rebels must have been influenced by some incident.

She must have believed that facing and opposing the rebels was the best response to the situation.

Otherwise, there would have been no reason for Astina to confront the rebels directly.

It was too dangerous, both politically and for Astina as an individual.

Cromwell didn't think the Royal army would lose, but what might happen to Astina was uncertain.

Having fought Aryandor himself, Cromwell was even more worried.

Astina's speech in the capital had a significant impact.

It gave the commoners, who were receiving aid from the rebels, another chance to rethink, and it raised awareness among others.

The rebels wouldn't just leave Astina alone after she made such a statement.

They could attack her in revenge for killing Jefrin in public or for political reasons.

Since Astina had united the empire again, killing her, the focal point, would boost the rebels' morale.

She was too attractive a target for the rebels.

In this situation, what pained Cromwell the most was that there was nothing he could do.

As the vice principal of the academy, he had influence in the political sphere, but he had to act too passively.

He was always part of the academy and one of its representatives.

He couldn't show his political inclinations or move freely.

Especially in such a significant event as opposing the rebels.

"How pathetic…”

Cromwell lamented his own powerlessness.

Knock, knock.

Just then, there was a knock on his office door.

"Come in…”

Cromwell started to say, but before he could finish, the door opened.

He could have called it rude, but there was only one person who would enter his office like that.

"It's been a while, Cromwell."

The person who entered the room was Robert, dressed in casual clothes, his hair carelessly combed.

Cromwell stood up abruptly upon seeing him.

"Robert…! You're back?"

At Cromwell's words, Robert smiled.

"Yes, I've finished up what I needed to do. Thinking about my vacation time ticking away made it unbearable to stay out any longer."

"Good, you're back. Come, sit down and let's talk."

Cromwell gestured kindly towards a sofa in the front.

Robert flopped onto the sofa Cromwell had pointed to.

"Ah, yes. I'm terribly exhausted."

He looked at Cromwell while lying back half-way.

"Any problems at the academy?"

"There's more work outside than here."

"You know more about outside matters than I do."

Cromwell had his own network of informants and was not short of information, but he didn't have the same experience as Robert, who had spent about half a year outside.

Robert, called a legend in the mercenary world, had more acquaintances outside the academy than within.

And there was a big difference between seeing and feeling things firsthand and just hearing about them.

Information could become unclear as it was passed along, and the content could be distorted.

"Did Rudy get into any trouble?"

Cromwell gave a wry smile at Robert's question.

"Like accidentally coming second in the joint assessment, or suddenly drawing in and capturing the rebels? Nothing much other than that."

"That's quite a lot for the short time I was away."

It would have been big news for any ordinary student, but for Rudy, it felt insignificant.

"At least there hasn't been any sword fighting."

“…Sword fighting?"

"With all those strong women around him. I thought there might be some sword fighting in my absence with his indecisive attitude."

"Women issues…”

"Ah, that indecisive boy. I wonder how he's doing."

Robert said this with a smile, clearly showing his fondness for Rudy.

"But Robert, have you heard about the Astria family lately?"

"Rudy entering the heir competition?"

"You know about it."

"Of course, I know. Someone had to work to make that happen."

Cromwell's eyes widened at that.

"I said I was going to investigate the Astria family. What did you think I meant?"

"Wasn't that related to necromancy?"

"I did other things too. I came across various matters while investigating necromancy."

"Ha ha…"

Cromwell laughed, but he couldn't laugh wholeheartedly.

He felt the contrast between himself and Robert.

Robert had actively worked for Rudy's sake, while he could do little for Astina.

He felt keenly that he was an inadequate mentor.

"What have you been doing?"

"Me? Just the usual. Taking care of academy affairs…"

"Astina seems to be in a difficult situation."

Robert hit the nail on the head.

He always did.

Seemingly casual, he was more perceptive than anyone else.

"Do you plan to just leave her be?"

“…There's nothing I can do right now."

"If you say so, I won't argue."

Robert stood up.

"Don't regret it later. I'm speaking from experience."

“…Thanks, I appreciate it."

"Anyway, I didn't come here to talk about that."

Robert approached Cromwell and pulled out a small bead from his pocket.

"Look at this with the principal."

“…What is this?"

"It's a secret about the Astria family."

More precisely, it was about necromancy, though Cromwell didn't elaborate.

"Weren't you finished with your work?"

"It doesn't seem like the right time to attack. I value my life too."

Robert had found where the necromancers were gathering.

But he couldn't attack right away.

The rebel leadership and Daemon, a necromancer, were nearby, as was Perrian Astria, Rudy's father and the current head of the Astria family.

He couldn't face both the master of spatial magic and the necromancers.

"But why give this to me?"

Cromwell knew whom Robert was cooperating with.

Jason Ophillius, the Empire's Chancellor.

Handing it over to him would practically end it all.

The aftermath would be handled by the empire.

"Something feels off."

"Off?"

"It stinks. Really stinks."

It was odd to distrust Robert, but to say that the Empire's Chancellor smelled fishy was strange.

Jason Ophillius had supported McDowell and served the emperor's faction for decades.

There was no reason to distrust him.

If the Chancellor had ulterior motives, the empire's balance would have been shattered.

His power was maintaining the balance between the emperor's and the nobles' factions.

It was puzzling to hear such doubts about someone so pivotal.

"Anyway, I'm not certain or basing this on any evidence, so don't worry about it."

"Okay. But what now with this?"

Robert shrugged.

"We'll attack when an opportunity arises."

"You mean us?"

"Who else would handle this?"

"Why not leave it to the empire? They'll take care of it."

"To cause division between the emperor's and nobles' factions in this situation? Planning a three-way battle?"

There was no need to create division in the midst of the conflict between the rebels and the empire.

"Just keep it between you and the principal for now. Just in case."

“…Understood."

After hearing Cromwell's response, Robert walked towards the door.

"Then I'm off to rest."

Robert waved his hand and left the vice principal's office.

Cromwell watched him go and then stared intently at the bead Robert had handed him.

On the day of the final exam.

I warmed up my body.

I wasn't thinking about anything else.

For now, I set aside my usual worries and focused only on preparing for the exam.

"In the magic circle… the formula is…”

I went over what I had memorized one more time.

Although the final exams after the joint assessment were said to be easy, I couldn't be complacent.

I needed to score high here.

I had lost to Yeniel in the joint assessment, so I had to outdo her score somehow.

Luckily, Yeniel didn't do well in the midterms.

As I walked to the exam hall, reciting from the book.

"Hey, you'll trip if you keep going like that."

A familiar voice called out.

I looked up and to the side, where a man with a spotty beard stood.

"Professor Robert?"

"Studying a bit now won't make much of a difference. Don't trip and ruin your condition. Just head to the exam hall quickly."

Robert chuckled and advised me.

I hurried over to him.

"When did you arrive? Why didn't you let me know?"

"Why would I contact you about coming here? Just greet me when you see my face."

I laughed at Robert's casual response.

"I wanted to learn more dark magic before heading back to the capital, but it was a shame you weren't around."

"What would you learn from me now? You're just studying on your own."

"Ha ha…"

"Anyway, I have something to tell you, so come to my office after your exam."

"Something to tell me?"

"Don't be curious now. Just do well in your exam."

Robert patted my back and walked away.

'…Something to tell me?'

I pondered briefly, then shook my head.

As Robert said, I could hear it later; there was no need to be curious now.

The exam came first.

I walked quickly to the exam hall and entered.

Then I opened my book and murmured to myself.

"I'm aiming for the top rank."

CHAPTER 207
FINAL EXAM 2 (5)

"The final exams are now over. You all have worked hard this semester."

The exams had ended.

I was somewhat taken aback by the higher-than-expected difficulty of the exams, but it felt like business as usual.

I looked out the window.

The weather had turned quite cold, and I could see that people's clothing had gotten thicker.

The leaves had fallen from the trees, leaving only bare branches behind.

It felt like just yesterday winter had passed, yet here it was again, bringing with it a fresh sense of nostalgia.

"The student council is over now, too."

With the end of the final exams, the semester had come to a close, which also meant the end of the student council.

I remembered relying heavily on the student council's help, whether it was for studying or other assistance.

After meeting with Professor Robert, I decided to stop by the student council room.

I planned to tidy up my stuff and express my gratitude to the other members.

Being involved in many unusual activities myself, the others in the student council had it tougher than me.

Especially Rie, thanks to whom I could move around freely.

Without Rie, the student council wouldn't have functioned properly.

Eager to talk to the student council, I quickly made my way to Professor Robert's lab.

As I approached Robert's lab, a voice reached my ears.

"Professorrrrrrrrrrr! You really came back! I'm so glad!!!"

It was a familiar voice.

But having not heard it in a while, it made me smile.

As I opened the door, I saw Gracie, making a fuss over Robert, and Robert himself looking at her with an air of disdain.

"How much I suffered in your absence, Professor…"

"Hello, Professor Gracie."

"…Huh?"

Gracie, who was in the middle of her passionate speech, turned to look at me.

"What are you doing, Professor? You're not a child."

"Uh…"

Gracie blushed and grabbed her head at my comment.

Robert burst into laughter at her reaction.

"For once, you're saying something sensible. Gracie, you're a professor now, behave like one."

"Ugh… I was just excited to see you. That's all."

Gracie stammered her reply, and Robert sighed.

"Grow up a little."

"Yes…"

Gracie, scolded by Robert, glared at me.

"Besides, Rudy Astria! You! If you're all better, you should be attending the lab!"

"Me?"

I looked at Gracie, puzzled.

"Do you know how much work has piled up in the lab!"

"…Professor, do you not know anything?"

"…Huh?"

"I'm now a third-year student."

"Is that so? A third-year…"

Realization dawned on Gracie, and her eyes widened.

"Oh…"

Typically, students belonging to a lab participate in research internships within the academy during their third-year social practice.

But there's no reason for me to be doing this, right?

"Since you're here, I might as well tell you now. I'll be heading to the capital in a couple of days. Thank you for everything you've done for me."

I felt that it was actually Gracie who owed a debt of gratitude, but I made the customary farewell.

"Right… your family…"

Gracie seemed to recall something about my family, standing there with her mouth agape.

"But, weren't you pushed out of the succession battle? I thought that's why you…"

"I just joined because we were short on funds."

I wondered if I had told Gracie too little about myself.

We were always busy working together, but I had never shared personal details.

"Then you should have at least mentioned it…"

"I thought you knew since it was around the final exams."

"So… you're leaving, and Yuni too…"

Gracie muttered to herself, then seemed horrified.

"What am I going to do now!"

"It's only been a few seconds since I told you to act mature."

Gracie looked at Robert with a gloomy expression.

"But…"

"As a professor, you should know how to stand on your own two feet. You can't depend on the students for everything."

Robert clicked his tongue several times and waved Gracie off.

"If you're done, leave. I have something to discuss with Rudy."

"You're too much! Professor! You should at least offer some comfort to this novice professor!"

"Why would I say such a thing? If you want consolation, go to Cromwell. He's your mentor."

"Ah…"

With her shoulders slumped, Gracie walked away weakly.

"Understood… I'll see you later then."

"Yes, see you in a bit."

Gracie then tilted her head in confusion.

"In a bit?"

"There's a dinner tonight. All the other professors will be there, aren't you coming?"

"Oh… I forgot about that."

"Let's have a drink and talk there. It's not appropriate to behave like this in front of the students."

Robert gestured towards me as he spoke.

It seemed he only scolded Gracie because I was present.

Even though I'm deeply involved with the professors, the student-professor relationship remains unchanged.

Gracie nodded vigorously at Robert.

"Yes, yes! See you later!"

"Alright."

After Gracie left the room.

Robert watched the space where Gracie had disappeared for a moment.

"Ah…"

Then, he let out a deep sigh.

"Such a bothersome fellow."

"Still, she works hard. Please be kind to her."

"Yes, it's been a long time since someone like her joined the academy…"

The reason Gracie was struggling with her professor duties was because she did everything meticulously.

She didn't shirk her duties, managed her own work, and even helped other professors, so it was natural she was busy.

"Usually, other professors only focus on their own work, often neglecting other responsibilities.

In such an environment, it seemed that even Robert was inclined to take care of someone like Gracie.

"By the way, what did you call me for?"

"Nothing major. I just wanted to discuss the Astria family with you."

"The Astria family?"

I laughed awkwardly at that.

Even though it's the Astria family, I knew very little about it.

I had been at the Astria household for only a week since my arrival here.

In the game too, there wasn't much detail about the Astria family, so I didn't have much to say.

"Do you know the current status of the Astria family?"

"…Only what you've told me. About the Astria family's connection with necromancers…"

"Yes, the necromancers. There are three reasons why the Astria family stands as a central ducal house in the empire. First, the necromancers."

Robert raised one finger.

"The necromancers supply the Astria family with mana stones, which are used to

create powerful magical tools. This helps the family sustain its resources. And secondly, the Astria family's spatial magic. I won't go into detail on that."

Robert put down his hand and lifted a stack of papers onto the desk.

"Lastly, the families around the Astria family. They support the Astria family, making it difficult for the empire to act rashly against them."

There isn't just one or two families supporting the Astria family.

One-third of the empire's nobility, a significant faction, supports the Astrias, preventing the emperor from easily meddling with them.

"There are two things you need to do in the capital. First, learn spatial magic. Second, win over those noble factions for yourself."

"…Win over the noble faction for myself?"

I was surprised.

I have long been marked as a supporter of the emperor's faction in the central empire.

How would I manage to attract the noble faction under these circumstances?

"Don't overthink it. These people aren't united under some noble cause; they're just together for their own interests. It should be easier to persuade them."

I nodded.

In essence, I was to convince them that supporting me was more beneficial than backing the current Astria family.

This thought somewhat eased my mind.

"The challenge is how to entice them."

"Exactly."

The benefits they could gain by abandoning the original Astria family and supporting

me.

Is there something like that?

The Astria family has been garnering the support of the nobility by advancing noble interests over those of the commoners.

Exploiting the common folk for a world that favors only the nobles.

Could I offer a benefit greater than the Astria family without exploiting the commoners?

As my expression darkened with these thoughts, Robert snorted dismissively.

"If you can't think of anything, why not use what you're good at?"

"Something I'm good at?"

A few things came to mind.

I had been making progress with black magic, and I was confident in my understanding of mana control, rivaling even the professors.

Recently, I had been diligently studying elementals.

Were these what he meant?

But what Robert suggested was completely unrelated.

"Win over one of the noble ladies. You're exceptionally skilled at charming women, aren't you? Gain support through a strategic marriage."

"What are you talking about?"

I was already dealing with complications in my relationships with women.

Was he suggesting I make it even more complicated?

Seeing my reaction, Robert chuckled.

"I'm joking. But seriously, think about how to win the support of the noble faction."

"I understand… I'll give it some thought."

"The necromancy-related matters, I'll handle them. You focus on your tasks."

Hearing Robert say this was reassuring.

As I nodded, Robert's expression turned serious.

"And remember this one thing. Ian Astria is not your enemy."

"My brother?"

Ian's reputation and achievements were too significant to be dismissed.

He was regarded as one of the most talented in the empire.

Seeing my puzzled look, Robert elaborated.

"I'm not saying he's insignificant. He's capable, but he can't step out of the shadow of your father. You'll understand what I mean once you're in the capital."

"I appreciate the advice. I'll keep it in mind."

I bowed to Robert and gave a grateful smile.

"Yes, and sort out your affairs with women. It's unbecoming for a man to dither."

"I'll keep that in mind too."

I nodded awkwardly and bowed to Robert.

"I'll visit when I have time, Master."

"That title again…"

Now, he just chuckled and shook his head whenever I called him 'Master'.

With that, I left Robert's office and headed towards the student council room, just as

I had planned before visiting the lab.

"Will Rudy ever show up? My legs are starting to cramp…”

"He should be here soon…”

"Didn’t you say something to him?"

"Well, it wouldn’t be a surprise if I had…”

Despite the lights being off, voices could be heard in the student council room.

It was Luna's surprise.

She had informed Rie earlier to prepare a surprise for Rudy.

With the end of the final exams and the conclusion of the student council activities, Luna planned a party to celebrate their hard work.

The problem was that they hadn't informed Rudy.

Rie, who had been in on the preparations, assumed Luna would have told Rudy since she was keen on organizing the event.

Busy wrapping up student council matters and preparing for final exams, they hadn’t paid attention to this detail.

"Should we tell him now?"

"Shall I fetch him?"

Kuhn, who was hiding nearby, popped his head out and suggested.

Rie pondered for a moment, then sighed.

"Everyone, come out. My legs are aching."

Locke crawled out from under a desk, Emily and Kuhn emerged from the cleaning

cupboard, and Luna squeezed out of the storeroom.

"We can’t keep doing this, not knowing when he’ll come…”

Rie, feeling slightly disappointed that Rudy hadn't come straight to the student council room after the exams, let out a sigh.

Luna looked down, feeling guilty.

“…Sorry."

"It’s not just your fault. I should have checked too. Let's stretch a bit and think…”

Thud— Thud—

As they spoke, footsteps were heard outside.

Everyone’s eyes widened at the sound.

"Hide!"

They quickly concealed themselves again.

The footsteps stopped outside the student council room, and the door opened.

As the person entered, everyone silently counted.

"One, two… three!"

Bang—

"Rudy, great job!"

"Rudy, well done!"

"Rudy…?"

They all jumped out, setting off small fireworks.

However…

“…Luna? Sis? Kuhn?"

The person at the door was Yuni.

Yuni looked bewildered as she gazed at everyone.

Confetti from the fireworks stuck to her hair.

“…Ah."

Rie held her head and sighed deeply.

“…Sorry, everyone."

Luna looked back at the others, her voice wavering.

Yuni squinted slightly and looked at them all.

"If you all make that face, I’ll feel hurt."

Just as Yuni wore a sulky expression,

“…What’s going on?"

Rudy peeked his head in from behind Yuni.

Everyone let out a deep sigh.

"It’s a total mess."

"Indeed…”

"Sorry…”

CHAPTER 208
FINAL EXAM 2 (6)

I smiled and looked at the dejected kids.

I couldn't be upset that they wanted to throw a party for me as a way of saying thanks for my hard work.

"Thank you, everyone. What have I done to deserve all this?"

"No, Rudy, you've done so much for us."

"Rudy's efforts are well known to us!"

“…Yeah, I did everything."

Luna and Kuhn shook their heads as they spoke, but Rie had a sulky look on her face.

I smiled at Rie.

"Right, Rie, I really appreciate it."

“…Hem hem!"

As I spoke to Rie, she coughed and blushed.

Just as we were creating a warm atmosphere,

"Seniors, if you're done talking, could you please help me?"

An uninvited guest who couldn't join our conversation.

There was Yuni.

Yuni was wrapped in colorful paper due to the fireworks that others had set off.

She was flailing her arms, struggling to get it off.

"Sorry Yuni… I'll help you."

Luna began to carelessly cut the paper with scissors.

I chuckled at that sight and looked outside.

"It really does feel like it's all over now."

"That's right. The student council is truly done now."

The place that was always piled with paperwork was now completely empty.

Only personal belongings remained, leaving it bare.

I picked up the nameplate in front of my desk.

"I guess I should take this too."

As I looked at the nameplate, something came to mind.

I opened the drawer of my desk.

Inside was another nameplate.

Astina's nameplate.

I had planned to return it to Astina but completely forgot about it.

I wiped the nameplate with my sleeve.

"I should return this."

Holding the nameplate, memories of becoming the student council president came flooding back.

"It's a bittersweet feeling."

"You're right. It was kind of fun, wasn't it?"

Emily said.

Rie gasped in horror.

"I would refuse if asked to do it again. It's a miracle I managed to handle this much paperwork while studying…”

"Wasn't it somewhat fun, though?"

At Kuhn's question, Rie's eyes sharpened.

“…What was fun about it?"

“…Staying up all night with the seniors to handle paperwork?"

"Ahaha…”

Luna scratched her cheek and let out an awkward laugh.

Rie glared at Kuhn and Emily with spiteful eyes.

"Then you two go out as the student council president and vice president. Then it'll be fun with the juniors."

"That's a bit…”

“…Absolutely not."

The fact that the positions of student council president and vice president were several times more strenuous than other student council roles was something even Kuhn and Emily knew.

Even though the two of them said it was fun, they clearly didn't want to do it again.

"So, are you two not planning to join the student council again?"

"It doesn't seem like there's any reason to. I never planned to be part of the student council in the first place."

That's right, Kuhn only joined because I persuaded him with various benefits.

He wouldn't do it alone without a good reason.

I turned my head and looked beside me.

"What about you, Yuni?"

Yuni tilted her head at my question.

"Me? What about me?"

I stared at Yuni for a moment before speaking.

“…Never mind."

It was clear that Yuni wouldn't want to be the student council president.

She had always been uninterested in such matters, not to mention the Emperor's position or anything similar.

"Then who will be in the next student council?"

"Diark might do it, don't you think?"

Kuhn responded to my question.

"Diark, huh…”

He had always been interested in the student council.

He ran in the last election but couldn't participate due to various circumstances, so he might take part this time.

He was a diligent guy, so he would probably make a good student council.

I smiled at Kuhn and Emily.

"When the next council comes in, make sure to hand over everything properly."

"Me? If Rudy does it…”

"I'm planning to go to the capital."

Kuhn's eyes widened.

"Are you going there to study to be a successor?"

"More precisely, to compete for the position."

"Congratulations on making it…!"

Everyone knew it was difficult for me to secure a successor position.

But the fact that I could at least compete brought congratulations from Kuhn.

Emily looked at Kuhn and then glanced around.

"So, does that mean we're the only ones left to hand over to?"

Everyone's gaze shifted to Luna.

It was known that Locke and Rie were going away for special training.

But no one had heard anything about Luna.

"Ah… I…"

Luna hesitated before speaking.

"I'm thinking of going towards becoming a Royal wizard."

"Royal wizard?"

"Yes, I thought it would be better to have people I know around…"

Luna didn't have any relatives in the capital.

Being from a noble family in a remote area, it would take a lot of searching to find even one blood relative.

So her mention of knowing people probably referred to me and Rie.

It wasn't a bad choice.

Rie and I could offer considerable support to Luna.

And with the frequent visits of professors to the capital, she wouldn't feel lonely.

"It seems like a good choice."

Luna beamed at my words.

"Right? Professor Mcguire recommended it."

"So everyone is really leaving…"

Kuhn and Emily looked at us with a hint of sadness.

"But it's not like we're graduating. We'll be back after a semester. And if there's time, we might drop by."

I smiled and stood up.

"Then let's say our goodbyes for now. You all worked really hard this past year."

"…You too, Rudy."

"Everyone really did a great job."

It was a year that was long in some ways and short in others.

There were many fun moments, and tough ones too, but it was a year worth its while.

A year of meeting and getting close to many people, of learning many things.

With that, we exchanged our last greetings at the student council with bright smiles.

After exchanging goodbyes with everyone, Rudy and Kuhn were walking towards the dormitory.

"Kuhn, thanks for your help."

"It's nothing. I'm happy to help."

Rudy had been too busy to pack his things, leaving a lot of his belongings at the student council office.

So, Kuhn was helping him move his stuff.

As they quietly transferred the items, Kuhn broke the silence.

"It's going to feel empty without the seniors."

"Empty? You have Emily, don't you?"

"Emily and the seniors… they're different."

Rudy chuckled.

"Don't worry. Good juniors will come in. It'll be fine."

Rudy himself had felt a sense of loss when Astina left.

But good juniors came in, offering help and making his days fun.

Kuhn, smiling, cautiously broached a subject.

"Senior, I have a question, if you don't mind…"

"What's on your mind?"

"It might be a bit rude, but… Can I ask you one thing?"

Kuhn's face was serious as he spoke.

"Senior… Who is your favorite senior?"

Rudy broke into a cold sweat and turned his head away at the question.

Realizing he might have crossed a line, Kuhn quickly apologized.

“…Sorry. I shouldn't have asked that."

"No, it's okay. These things happen."

Rudy couldn't bring himself to answer the question.

Instead, he posed a different one.

"Kuhn… I have a slightly sensitive question too. Is that okay?"

"Sure. You can ask me anything."

Rudy hesitated before speaking.

"You're dating Emily, right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Then… how did you confess? If you don't mind me asking?"

Rudy blushed as he asked.

"A confession?"

Kuhn was surprised.

He had thought Rudy, of all people, would have some experience in romance, but his current expression suggested otherwise.

“…Hmm. My case is a bit unique, so I might not be the best to answer."

"Unique how?"

"Emily and I grew up together, so there wasn't a formal confession."

"What?"

Rudy was taken aback.

"So, you're not officially dating?"

"It's not that. A confession isn't always necessary to start dating."

"You didn't confess… but you're dating?"

Rudy found the concept baffling.

"It's just that we both knew we liked each other, so there was no need for a formal confession. A confession is just a way to confirm each other's feelings."

"I see."

Rudy replied, still a bit flustered.

"If it bothers you, perhaps gifting something she likes while confessing might work."

"Hmm…"

Rudy wore a slightly uncomfortable expression.

Kuhn watched Rudy with a wistful smile.

'If it were Luna or Rie, they would be overjoyed even with a simple word of confession.'

A grand confession wasn't really necessary.

Kuhn didn't know much about Astina, but he knew well about those two.

'But… to which senior is he planning to confess…?'

Kuhn gazed at Rudy, lost in thought.

It was impossible to tell what Rudy was thinking.

'I hope we can all see each other again when we return to the academy… '

With that thought, Kuhn continued moving the luggage.

CHAPTER 209
ASTRIA (1)

I had finished packing all my belongings and was ready to head to the capital.

There had been brief departures from the academy before, but preparing to leave for good brought on a wave of new emotions.

There was no place as comfortable as here…

I was surrounded by familiar people, and my actions were free.

Now, outside the academy, I would have to be cautious with every move.

A single misstep could lead to unforeseen trouble.

At the academy, the Astria name made actions easier, but in the capital, my name might become a hindrance.

Being the center of attention only added to this.

Early in the morning.

I picked up my luggage and stepped outside.

I planned to leave without delay since I had to depart anyway.

It was so early that only the chirping of birds could be heard, and no one was in sight.

Yet, the fresh breeze was uplifting.

"Rudy, is that you?"

Then, a coachman in the distance approached me.

"Yes, it's me."

"I'll take your luggage."

The coachman quickly ran over, taking the bags from my hand and loading them onto the carriage.

Perhaps he recognized my name, or maybe it was just the briskness of a coachman from the capital.

After loading my bags, the coachman looked at me.

"Shall we depart immediately, or is there somewhere you'd like to stop by first?"

I glanced briefly at the academy.

I contemplated visiting Robert or Cromwell one last time, but then shook my head.

It was doubtful they'd be at work at this time, and without anything specific to say, there seemed no point in stopping by.

"Let's go now."

I spoke briefly and boarded the carriage.

The inside of the carriage was comfortable.

Renting an expensive carriage meant plush seats and a space comfortable enough to rest.

The front window of the carriage opened, and the coachman peeked in.

"It'll be a long ride, so feel free to sleep. The carriage is enchanted with vibration control magic for a comfortable rest."

"Ah, okay."

"Then, we'll be departing now."

Time passed, and I slowly stirred from my stiffness.

It felt like a significant amount of time had passed, yet we had not yet arrived at the capital.

Despite the carriage being as comfortable as possible, the confined space had left my body feeling cramped.

I moved slightly to ease the stiffness and then slumped back into the seat.

"I should have taken out a few books."

Once I had loosened up, I realized there was nothing much to do.

Since I had packed the books separately, I would need to stop the carriage to get them out.

Not knowing exactly where we were, and considering that stopping the carriage would only delay our arrival, I decided against it.

I looked towards the window the coachman had opened earlier.

With a soft clatter,

"Ah, you're awake?"

As I opened the window, the coachman addressed me.

"Yes, I am. How much longer until we arrive?"

"About an hour more to go. And please, feel free to speak informally. I'm just a humble commoner."

I shook my head at the coachman's words.

"There's nothing insignificant about being a commoner. We are all similar, after all."

"Ha, thank you for saying so," he responded skillfully, perhaps used to interacting with nobles.

"I'm a bit bored; would you mind keeping me company with some conversation?"

"Of course, it would be my pleasure."

I smiled at his response and continued the conversation.

"Do you know the current state of the capital?"

"The capital, you say… It's quite chaotic. With the rebels and the empire clashing, some people are even preparing to flee."

"I see… And what about the nobles?"

This coachman seemed to interact with many nobles, given his job of driving a carriage primarily for them.

It would be natural for him to hear stories about the nobles during his travels.

I planned to gather some information.

The coachman glanced at me cautiously before speaking.

"Ha, how could I know what the nobles are thinking?"

"You can speak freely. I'm not one to fuss over such matters."

"Well… from what I've heard in my line of work, it seems the nobles are also busy. Preparing for war, or deciding which side to align with."

His voice grew softer.

"Caught between the rebels and the empire?"

"Oh, no. How could someone serving the empire choose the rebels? I was referring to factions within the empire."

Factional movements…

Such movements would undoubtedly lead to turmoil.

The balance between the noble faction and the emperor's faction, which had been maintained until now, could collapse.

For me, however, this was somewhat good news.

As a contender for the Astria family's succession, I needed to pull the Astria subordinate families, who were part of the noble faction, to my side.

I directly asked the coachman.

"Do you know anything about the movements of the families under Astria?"

The coachman quickly shook his head.

"I wouldn’t know such things. How could a commoner like me be aware of the nobility's affairs?"

A strong denial often implies the opposite.

I was just probing, but his response suggested he knew something.

I cracked a sly smile.

"Twenty gold coins."

“…Pardon?"

"I'll give you twenty gold coins. How about you share what you know?"

Twenty gold coins was a sum comparable to the price of this carriage.

It was an amount a commoner might never see in a lifetime.

He might be reluctant to speak for fear of jeopardizing his livelihood as a coachman, but this amount could be worth the risk.

"Ah… well…”

The coachman's eyes flickered with indecision.

"I'll keep our conversation confidential. Why don't you tell me?"

To the coachman, my smile might have seemed like a devil's temptation, but I didn't mind.

After hesitating, he finally spoke.

"Well… this is just something I overheard… Do you know the Mayer family?"

"Yes, I'm aware of them."

A count's family under the Astria name, quite influential in their own right.

"I once served the young lady and the head of the Mayer family. During that time, I overheard them arguing loudly about something…

It was… about supporting you."

"The Mayer family?"

I was puzzled.

The Mayer family was a well-known, loyal family to the Astria name.

For them to consider supporting me, an outsider? It was good news but felt a bit odd.

"Are you sure about this information?"

"Yes, sir! I heard it myself… So then…"

I maintained my smile.

"Let's settle it once we arrive."

"Th-thank you."

Though the information was somewhat ambiguous, it gave me something to ponder.

The Mayer family…

As I contemplated, a doubt arose.

Could they have been acquainted with the original Rudy Astria?

Even if the original Rudy Astria behaved recklessly, he might have had close connections.

Could I possibly benefit from the original Rudy Astria's relationships?

While this thought brought some reassurance, it also stirred unease within me.

After all, the family members knew me as the original Rudy.

If my changed demeanor became too apparent, I wondered how they would react.

"Ah, we're almost there."

As I mulled over these thoughts, the capital came into view.

Upon arriving at the capital, I headed straight to the Astria mansion.

As the carriage entered the grounds of the Astria estate, I was greeted by an unwelcome scene.

Ian Astria was standing at the front of the mansion, flanked by several nobles.

It almost felt like they had come out to welcome me.

I had informed them of my arrival time in advance, but I didn't expect them to be waiting like this.

I thought they would just be preparing lunch or something.

Besides, wasn't Ian supposed to be busy?

I heard he secured the position of commander in the Royal army, so seeing him idly at the mansion was exasperating.

It was already lunchtime, and the thought of dining with him made me worry about losing my appetite.

The carriage came to a stop inside the mansion, and I stepped out.

"Rudy, it’s been a while."

Ian greeted me as I disembarked from the carriage.

"Yes, it has been a long time, brother."

As I returned the greeting, the nobles beside him chuckled.

"It's nice to see siblings getting along so well!"

"Indeed. So many families have discord among siblings, but it's perhaps for this reason that the Astria family continues its legacy!"

I frowned at the nobles' remarks.

What have we done to be considered close?

Is a simple greeting all it takes to be seen as having a good relationship?

Seeing them interpret such basic interaction as flattery was baffling.

The coachman who accompanied me probably could have flattered better.

"Well then, Rudy, let’s go inside for a meal," Ian suggested.

I nodded in agreement.

"Yes, that sounds good."

I followed Ian into the mansion.

CHAPTER 210
ASTRIA (2)

We entered the mansion and took our seats in the dining room.

"Have you been doing well at the academy?"

Ian asked me while we were eating.

"Thanks to your concern, I've been managing,"

I replied to Ian with a subtle expression.

Although I was hungry, the dining situation was too uncomfortable to hide my expression.

Why did this guy suddenly set up such a meal?

Eating alone with Ian would be uncomfortable enough…

The nobles seated around me.

About a dozen nobles were joining Ian and me at our dining table.

Even a cursory glance at their faces was enough to recognize who was who.

Maybe it was due to studying about nobles at the academy, but their presence was hard to ignore.

Ian put down his food and looked at me with a smile.

"Now that I think of it, I heard you've finally become the top student this time."

I grimaced internally.

There was an edge to his words, 'this time.'

As if he had always been the top student, but now it was finally my turn.

Was he trying to embarrass me by calling me here?

Still, I held back.

"It's my fault for realizing things late, but I plan to graduate as the top student, so don't worry."

"Well, make sure you don't bring shame to the name of Astria,"

Ian said.

I gritted my teeth at his words and looked around.

Seeing me hold back, the nobles looked at me with faces of surprise.

Yes, it would be better to show these nobles my changed self.

As I scanned the faces, one person caught my eye.

Count Mayer.

The man I had heard about from the coachman.

He was a middle-aged man with sharp features and black hair.

Despite his age, his robust appearance showed he was a warrior.

The Mayer family was famous for their swordsmanship.

Once called the Sword of the Empire, they were a prestigious family, but lately, their influence had waned.

It wasn't just because the empire heavily supported magic, but also because the Mayer family had not produced any remarkable talents.

The head of the family was getting old and couldn't show the prowess of his prime, and his heirs couldn't match his skill, leading to their inevitable decline.

Thus, to survive, the Mayer family had attached itself to the noble Astria family.

It seemed they had judged that they wouldn't survive if they remained neutral as before.

Considering this situation, it was an excellent opportunity to bring them to my side.

They were not originally related to the Astria family but joined them for political survival.

Though I might be seen as a less stable ally compared to Ian, the Mayer family would surely be deeply considering it, thinking of the honor they could regain if they succeed.

Currently, I have no close allies, so the rewards when I secure that position will be immense.

I closely observed Count Mayer before turning my head away.

It seemed better to speak with him separately later, rather than initiating conversation now.

Turning towards Ian, I opened my mouth.

"Speaking of which, shouldn't you be managing the Royal army?"

"I stopped by briefly for a family meal. With Astina here, there shouldn't be any problems."

I was startled at the mention of Astina's name.

Ian didn't miss my reaction.

"Weren't you somewhat close to Astina? I remember you two being together when I visited the academy."

"Yes, I helped Astina when she was the council president."

"Oh, I heard about that. Astina said she was indebted to you."

"How is Astina doing?"

"She's fine. The Royal army is still in the preparatory stage, so it's not too busy."

At that, my eyes sparkled.

"Then, may I visit you sometime?"

"To see me?"

"I'm curious about the state of the Royal army and would like to observe."

In truth, my visit wasn't to see Ian but Astina.

I wanted to ask about her plans and see her face to check if she was okay.

Additionally, I was curious about whether the Royal army could counter the rebels.

Ian responded firmly to my request.

"That might be difficult. Given the situation, we're maintaining strict security."

"I see."

I swallowed my disappointment.

If not now, perhaps there would be an opportunity later.

With that hope, I held back my words.

Thus, our meal continued.

It was a quiet dinner, devoid of significant conversation.

As time passed, the uneasy meal concluded.

The nobles and I followed Ian as we rose from our seats.

Ian seemed ready to leave, heading towards the courtyard.

"Rudy, it's good to see you after such a long time. We may not meet often, but let's have meals together occasionally."

"Yes, if you wish, Brother…"

The meal ended without much else said.

Why did he invite me for a meal when there was no particular reason?

I wasn't keen on such pointless gatherings.

Despite his apparent dislike for me, why did Ian arrange this meal?

As I pondered, Ian spoke up.

"Ah, and keep next week free."

"…?"

As I looked puzzled, Ian continued.

"Next week, Father intends to teach you spatial magic. I wanted to pass on that message."

"Ah…"

I remembered the scroll I had received from the royal family.

The inheritance of spatial magic.

Hearing those words unexpectedly lifted my spirits.

The food that had been stuck in my throat until the meal seemed to go down smoothly now.

"Understood. Thank you,"

I replied to Ian with a broad smile.

If Ian had come just to convey this message, I wondered how bitter he must feel

inside.

So, I smiled even wider, as if to tease him.

"Well, I should be going now,"

Ian said, offering his farewell before climbing into his carriage.

As Ian left, the other nobles also bid me goodbye and started boarding their carriages.

I turned away from the nobles and began to walk.

"Spatial magic…"

I had already witnessed the power of spatial magic with my own eyes.

The spatial magic used by my future self.

Its power was beyond imagination.

However, I was uncertain if I could wield that ability properly.

"If my future self could use it properly, it means I should be able to use it too,"

I mused, talking to myself as I headed towards my room.

"…Rudy?"

A female voice called out from behind me.

Turning around, I saw a woman with black hair in armor, looking chaste and gazing at me with warm eyes.

Her armored appearance gave her the air of a knight.

Who is she?

I asked, tilting my head in curiosity.

"Who might you be?"

I knew it was impolite to ask such a question to someone I might know, but it was better than pretending to recognize her.

It's ruder to be caught faking familiarity.

"You are Rudy, aren't you!"

Despite my rude question, the woman smiled even brighter.

"Yes, it's me! Karen Mayer."

Her voice was laced with excitement.

It was surprising to see her act this way.

Surely she must have known the previous Rudy Astria.

Why would she show such an attitude?

I was astonished that someone who got along well with the notorious Rudy existed.

No, more than that, her use of the Mayer family name implied she was a lady of the Mayer family.

I quickly assessed the situation.

If she already harbored a fondness for me, it would be easier to draw the Mayer family to my side.

I needed to befriend this person.

"Ah, my apologies. I had completely forgotten. I offer my apologies to the lady."

I bowed my head, apologizing formally.

I executed the etiquette I had learned at the academy flawlessly.

As I raised my head, pleased with my response, the expression on Lady Mayer had

turned cold.

Her face now bore the sharp and icy impression similar to Count Mayer's I had seen earlier.

The warm gaze from moments ago was nowhere to be found.

"Ah…?"

Did I make a mistake?

Confused by Lady Mayer's sudden change of expression, I felt bewildered.

It was certainly proper etiquette.

Yet, her expression had changed abruptly despite no unusual action from my side.

I couldn't fathom what might have caused it.

'Did I make some mistake…?'

"Karen."

Just as I was about to ask Lady Mayer, Count Mayer appeared behind us.

Count Mayer's eyes widened upon seeing me.

"Ah, you were with Rudy. I hope my daughter hasn't caused any trouble."

“…No, nothing at all. Did you enjoy your meal?"

"Yes, thank you."

The Count responded briefly to my routine question.

It didn't feel like he deliberately kept it short.

He seemed naturally unaccustomed to making smooth, diplomatic remarks.

"Then, I shall take my leave."

Count Mayer bowed his head to me and gestured to Karen.

Karen, however, continued to glare at me despite her father's presence.

"Karen."

“…Yes, Father. I'm coming."

Only after Count Mayer repeated himself did she finally move.

I could breathe easier only after Count Mayer and his daughter were out of sight.

"It feels like something has gone wrong…”

What exactly was the original Rudy Astria's relationship with them?

I grasped my head in confusion.

Karen Mayer and Count Mayer boarded the carriage together.

"We're departing now,"

The coachman announced, and as the carriage started to move, Count Mayer spoke.

"It's been a while since you met Rudy, hasn't it?"

“…Yes."

Count Mayer noticed Karen's less than enthusiastic response and tilted his head curiously.

He continued,

"I've been thinking."

Count Mayer believed he knew Rudy well, especially since his daughter Karen had spent time with Rudy from a young age.

"The current Rudy Astria seems trustworthy. He has completely changed from what the rumors suggested."

The Rudy he knew before was the epitome of a troublemaker.

In fact, he had wanted to prevent his daughter from associating with Rudy, but he let it be due to the wishes of Karen and the Astria family head.

But now, Rudy was entirely different.

He knew how to show respect, keep his temper, and had reportedly achieved good grades at the academy.

Such behavior was unimaginable for the Rudy Count Mayer knew.

'That troublemaker turned into a decent person. Or perhaps, he's just grown up.'

Count Mayer looked sternly at Karen.

"As you wish—"

"He's changed…"

Karen interrupted Count Mayer.

"He's not the Rudy Astria I knew before."

Karen's eyes sharpened as she spoke to the Count.

Count Mayer nodded at her words.

"Yes, he's changed…"

"That's not the Rudy I know!!!"

"…What?"

Count Mayer looked incredulous.

"The Rudy I knew wasn't like that! The Rudy I know! Rudy is!!"

Karen, tears welling in her eyes, was agitated.

Count Mayer wondered what she was talking about.

"My dear… calm down first."

"How can I be calm! Rudy is!!!"

"Well, we can't be sure he's changed. We haven’t had a proper conversation yet."

The commanding presence Count Mayer exhibited at the Astria estate was absent.

Instead, he appeared as a father unable to sway his daughter.

At Count Mayer's words, Karen stopped her outburst.

"Maybe… maybe he's just acting…”

"Yes, dear. The carriage is shaking; please sit down."

“…Yes."

Count Mayer cleared his throat and spoke again.

"Then what you mentioned earlier…”

"I'll put it on hold for now. If Rudy has changed, it all becomes meaningless."

Count Mayer sighed at Karen's response.

"What are you planning to do then?"

“…I will meet Rudy myself."

Karen's sharp eyes gleamed.

"I need to see it with my own eyes."

CHAPTER 211
ASTRIA (3)

The sun was high in the sky.

Dragging my heavy body out of bed, I slightly parted the curtains and stared blankly out the window.

"I overslept……”

At the academy, there was always something happening every day, so I never slept in late.

However, knowing there was nothing scheduled for the next day, I ended up oversleeping.

Of course, it was partly because I had gone to bed late last night.

I stayed up until late at night, studying about spatial magic.

I planned to study in advance before my father returned to teach me spatial magic.

However, I was surprised by the lack of information on spatial magic.

There were historical books and others praising its abilities, but none explaining how this magic works and how to use it.

I thought it was natural for the academy not to have books on spatial magic because it was a secret of the Astria family, but even the Astria family's library didn't have such books.

It's been four days since I came to the capital from the academy.

Despite my search during this time, I found nothing.

"Maybe it's hidden somewhere else……”

That seemed like a reasonable assumption.

It made sense to handle spatial magic, arguably the Astria family's greatest weapon, with care.

I sighed, realizing I had gone through unnecessary trouble.

I sighed.

Knock, knock.

There was a knocking at my door.

“Are you awake?”

I heard the maid's voice from outside the door.

"Yes."

As I responded, several maids entered my room.

They opened the tightly shut curtains and brought me a wet towel and drinking water.

Although I wasn't used to such treatment, it didn't feel uncomfortable, so I naturally accepted it.

As I took a sip from the cup the maids brought, one of the maids spoke up.

"Young master Rudy, Miss Karen Meyer is waiting for you in the reception room."

“……What?"

I was surprised by the maid's words.

Karen?

Why would she suddenly come?

It's basic etiquette for nobles to seek permission from each other before meeting.

A young lady from a count's family wouldn't be unaware of this fact.

"Did she come on urgent business?"

"It doesn't seem like that. She has been waiting for over two hours."

"Two…… hours?"

I made someone wait for two hours because I overslept?

Even though we didn't have an appointment, I felt terribly sorry.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"I'm sorry. Miss Karen Meyer asked us not to wake you."

"She said not to wake me? Did she say anything else?"

The maid hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"She…… smiled and said she's used to waiting."

"……"

She smiled and said she's used to waiting……

I looked into Karen while staying at the mansion.

Karen had been Rudy's childhood friend since they were young.

In high-ranking families like the ducal house, it's common for children to spend time with peers from families of similar status.

For Rudy, that friend was Karen.

From what I gathered, Karen and Rudy weren't particularly close.

Rudy often bullied Karen, yet she still visited the Astria family to see him.

Still, I couldn't understand why Karen gave me that look.

Shouldn't a childhood friend be happy if the other decides to lead a righteous life?

It didn’t feel like she was trying to use me, a delinquent.

Karen's warm gaze during our first meeting seemed genuine.

After much thought, I concluded that Karen's behavior resulted from suddenly seeing a changed childhood friend.

It's awkward when someone you know changes abruptly.

They no longer seem like the person you knew, creating a sense of distance.

So, my approach was clear.

In front of Karen, I needed to appear as if I was gradually changing.

Instead of changing suddenly, showing a slow transformation would let Karen get used to the new me.

"Well, I'll head to the reception room then."

"Understood."

I changed clothes and headed to the reception room where Karen was.

"Young master Rudy."

Karen greeted me.

Last time we met, she was dressed like a knight in armor, but now she wore typical noblewoman's attire.

If it were me in this situation, I would have apologized, seeming remorseful.

"Yeah."

I responded curtly.

My expression showed no sign of regret. I had to act.

"Young master Rudy…!"

As I acted, Karen smiled as if pleased.

I pushed further.

"Coming without an appointment. Have you no manners?"

The real Rudy would have likely criticized the other person's mistake rather than admit his own.

After saying this, I observed Karen's expression.

Ah.

Karen smiled awkwardly.

There was happiness in her expression, but it was subtly uncomfortable.

Had I been too harsh?

"Tha… I…”

"Young master Rudy."

I was about to shift gears and apologize, but Karen interrupted me.

"You can call me 'you' like before."

'You'?

She's suggesting informal speech?

Maybe…

"What right do you have to order me around?"

I spoke to Karen again, behaving like a brat.

"I'm, I'm sorry."

Karen apologized to me, but her expression subtly showed happiness.

So, it wasn't my scolding that upset her, but rather my not using 'you' that made her unhappy.

I may not understand what Karen is thinking, but for now, I have to play along with her.

Maintaining good relations with the Meyer family was crucial, and Karen served as the important link between us.

I glanced at the maid.

"I'm hungry. Prepare a meal."

Such an imperious demeanor, disregarding the guest.

It was clear that Karen had already eaten.

I paid her no mind.

"Oh, um…"

The maid looked flustered, glancing at Karen for a cue.

I quickly weighed my options.

Would it be ruder to invite her to dine with me, or better to leave her be?

"Oh, I've already eaten, so…"

Before I could decide, Karen, noticing the maid's hesitation, responded with a smile.

I made a snap decision.

"Are you refusing to join me for a meal?"

"No? No, I'll join you for the meal…"

"So, you mean to let me eat alone?"

It's a kind of torture, forcing a full person to eat.

Pleased with my rascally decision, I grinned.

Hearing my words, Karen quickly responded.

"I'll join you! Please prepare a serving for me!"

"Yes… Alright…"

The maid replied reluctantly, clearly puzzled by my sudden change in behavior.

Since this was not the main house but a mansion in the capital, these maids were new to me.

I had been kind to them since my arrival, so their confusion was understandable.

Still, I needed to act this way.

I resolved to treat the maids even better in the future to manage my reputation.

After a while, the meal was served in the reception room.

"Let's eat."

I started eating the food laid out before me.

The Astria family's cuisine was exceptionally high-quality, incomparable to what I had at the academy.

Eating this meal, which I couldn't appreciate when dining with Ian, was now an immensely satisfying experience.

I looked at Karen while eating.

Karen held her utensils and just toyed with her food.

As I suspected, she had already eaten.

Observing her, I spoke up.

"Don't you like the food?"

Karen shook her head vigorously.

"No, not at all! It's delicious!"

"Then why aren't you eating much?"

I pretended to be oblivious.

"Should I call the chef…?"

As I glanced towards the maid, Karen exclaimed loudly.

"It's so delicious I wanted to savor it! It's, it's really good!"

Karen grabbed her utensils and started piling food into her mouth.

She stuffed the food in, her expression betraying the discomfort of eating when already full.

Seeing Karen's reaction, a sense of guilt began to creep up on me.

Had I gone too far?

On second thought, there was no need to behave to such an extent.

It would have sufficed to just verbally act like a ruffian.

Yet, retracting my words now wouldn't be something a ruffian would do.

I had to keep her from eating comfortably without making it too awkward.

I looked at Karen.

"Your food looks tastier than mine."

A ruffian always covets what others have, even if it's something trivial.

It was somewhat a textbook move.

Which noble would envy another's meal?

I was about to smile smugly, satisfied with my performance, when…

“……What?"

Karen's eyes frosted over.

It was the same look she had given me before, questioning my behavior.

I was taken aback.

I thought I had acted correctly.

I didn't expect such a reaction.

Where had I gone wrong?

I swallowed my confusion and thought calmly.

My actions were surely ruffian-like.

It didn't seem like I was at fault.

So, the problem was with doing this to Karen.

Taking her food.

Why should she be upset when I'm offering to rid her of the food that was troubling her?

Then it hit me.

The 'troubling' food.

Could it be…

I turned away from Karen's icy gaze and looked at the maid.

"Prepare double the portion of what Karen is eating. I'll take her food."

"Double, sir?"

"Ahh…!"

The maid was flustered, and Karen's eyes widened in surprise.

A mix of shock and joy was evident in her expression.

Why?

Was this the right move?

I looked at Karen, bewildered.

"Double… double the portion…"

Karen murmured to herself, seemingly in awe.

I was increasingly perplexed by what Karen was thinking.

As I sighed, exasperated.

"Young master Rudy!"

Bang!

A maid burst into the reception room in a hurry.

I frowned at her sudden intrusion.

"What impudence. Can't you see we're having a meal?"

Yes, this situation was better.

In such a scenario, whether a ruffian or a normal person, one could react similarly…

"A guest… has just arrived!"

"…A guest?"

I looked puzzled.

Karen observed me.

"Did you have an appointment today?"

This was a problem.

Especially while I was with Karen.

I had to act like a ruffian in front of Karen and show a normal demeanor to the other guest.

It was impossible to exhibit such contrasting behaviors in front of two different people.

“……Who has come?"

"Th-That's…”

The maid, before she could finish her sentence, looked to the side and gasped in surprise.

She then turned and politely greeted the newcomer.

I was wondering what was going on.

My question was quickly answered.

I saw the person walking towards the reception room.

"Senior, I've arrived."

Yuni walked into the room where we were.

CHAPTER 212
ASTRIA (4)

"Senior, I've arrived."

Behind Yuni were maids, looking flustered and trying to stop her.

She seemed to have barged in without proper guidance from a maid.

I was taken aback at Yuni's appearance.

I had heard no news of her coming.

More than that, it was puzzling that she was in the capital.

Rie had tasks remaining at the Academy and was scheduled to leave a week after me.

I had thought Yuni would come with her, but here she was, right before my eyes.

However, knowing the guest was Yuni brought some relief.

It would have been troublesome if it were a noble unfamiliar with me.

With Yuni, I could later explain the situation, which was fortunate in this regard.

But the issue was how Yuni would act.

If Yuni caught on to my behavior and questioned it…

Still, I trusted Yuni.

She had changed lately, becoming more perceptive and socially adept.

If I gave her a signal, she would surely catch on.

I looked at Yuni and quickly made a gesture.

I glanced at Karen beside me, then widened my eyes to signal Yuni.

Yuni caught my gesture and furrowed her brows.

"What are you doing?"

Yuni looked utterly clueless, gazing at me.

The trust I had quickly turned to despair.

"Hmm?"

At Yuni's words, Karen looked at me.

I quickly changed my expression to a nonchalant one, pretending nothing was wrong.

Karen glanced at me, puzzled, then turned her attention back to Yuni, examining her closely.

"Could it be… Princess Yuni?"

"Hmm? And who are you?"

Karen immediately stood up and greeted Yuni with respect.

"Apologies. I am Karen Mayer, the eldest daughter of the Mayer family. An honor to meet you, Princess Yuni Von Ristonia, the flower of the empire."

Despite her peculiar personality, the greeting was impeccably polite.

Yuni, hearing Karen's introduction, pondered for a moment, then clapped her hands.

"Ah! The lady preparing to become a knight!"

"Yes, that's me."

Yuni, notorious for not remembering faces and names, surprisingly recalled Karen.

Whether it was because Karen was preparing to be a knight, or because the Mayer

family was part of the noble faction, Yuni remembered her.

"Nice to meet you."

Yuni smiled with her eyes and waved at Karen.

It was a normal greeting, but a sense of unease grew within me.

"But why are you with senior?"

“…What?"

"Huh?"

Their eyes and mouths were smiling.

Yet, the atmosphere felt chilly.

It was the first time I had seen Yuni emit such an aura.

"Why are you here?"

"Ah… I heard Rudy had returned… just wanted to see him…”

"What business do you have seeing senior?"

"That… we were close since childhood… so…”

"Being close as children means you're still close now? Or is senior so idle that he dines with just anyone?"

"It's not like that…”

Under Yuni's pressure, Karen's voice grew increasingly meek.

Believing I couldn't leave the situation as it was, I opened my mouth.

"Stop it there."

“…Senior?"

"Isn't that enough?"

As I was about to scold Yuni,

"No, it's not!"

Karen interrupted.

"I'm the one at fault, so it's only right for me to be reprimanded!"

Her face was slightly flushed with excitement.

Karen looked at Yuni.

"Princess! You can reprimand me more!"

“…What?"

"I deserve to be scolded! Everything you said, Princess, was correct!"

Yuni flinched and stepped back, then looked at me with fear in her eyes.

"Senior… what's with her?"

I had no answer.

I didn't understand it myself.

"Have you eaten yet?"

“…No, not yet."

"Then sit down. Since we're eating, let's eat together."

“…Okay."

Yuni sat at the table, her eyes filled with terror as she looked at Karen.

Fear of the unknown.

While I was somewhat familiar with such behavior, for the young Yuni, it seemed to be a shock.

I sighed and was about to call the maid.

"Let's have the meal…”

Before I could finish, the door to the room opened again.

"Young master Rudy… the meal you requested…”

"Ah…”

The meal I had ordered for Karen arrived.

Stew, bread, and salad.

Exactly double the amount Karen initially received.

Yuni looked at me with a puzzled face.

"Senior… is someone else coming?"

As Yuni spoke, Karen raised her hand.

"It's, it's for me!"

Karen, who clearly had already eaten, left Yuni confused.

"You've finished eating, haven't you?"

"No! Young master Rudy definitely said to eat double…”

Karen stopped mid-sentence.

She seemed to realize what she was doing.

“…But, Young master Rudy… I don't think I can eat all of this. I'm too full…”

Karen turned her gaze to me.

Her eyes begged not to be punished.

“…Yuni."

“…Yes?"

"Eat that."

“…That? It's too much."

"Eat what you can…”

"Ah…”

Karen let out a sigh tinged with regret.

She couldn't say it out loud and just looked at me.

Her eyes conveyed a message.

That food was meant for her.

I ignored Karen's pleading gaze.

My conscience couldn't bear it.

And then,

"What's this… Scary…”

Yuni trembled in fear at the sight of Karen.

After the meal,

Karen returned to the Mayer mansion.

Initially, she was reluctant to leave, but after being admonished a few times by Yuni and me, she left with a satisfied look.

Yuni, sitting across from me, asked.

"What's with that person?"

"She's the daughter of the Mayer family."

"I know that. But why does she have such an expression when being scolded?"

I couldn't bring myself to answer that.

I didn't have precise information, just speculations.

And I didn't want to expose Yuni to such depths.

"Okay, let's say that behavior is possible. But what's her relationship with you, Senior?"

"Me?"

I answered without much thought.

"A bridge to the Mayer family?"

It didn't feel right to call Karen a childhood friend since I knew so little about her.

If Yuni started probing into this, it would surely become a headache.

Better to imply that we weren't close in the past.

"Hmm? But she said she was your childhood friend."

"You said it yourself. Just because we were close as kids doesn't mean we are now."

"Right? The present is what matters?"

Yuni seemed satisfied with my answer and smiled pleasantly, then continued.

"So, what am I to you?"

I replied without hesitation.

"You're you."

“…What's that supposed to mean?"

Yuni is Yuni.

She's quite unique, so in my mind, 'Yuni' has become its own concept.

Yuni pouted her lips and grumbled.

"You know, like 'the woman who shakes my heart~'. When she's around, my heart pounds~."

"That's definitely not the case, so don't worry."

"Tch. You're too blunt. That hurts."

Yuni scrunched up her nose.

"Even if it's not to that extent, appreciate that I give you special treatment."

I couldn't guarantee that this special treatment was entirely positive, but considering her a good person, it seemed alright.

Yuni seemed displeased and glared at me.

"If you keep talking like that, I won't tell you why I came."

"Why did you come?"

I tilted my head.

"Now that I think about it, why are you here? You could have at least told me. I would have prepared."

"I can get that treatment at the royal palace. Whatever you offer would just be uncomfortable."

Yuni sighed and looked at me.

"So, what am I to you, Senior?"

“…A good younger sister?"

"Is that all?"

"You are you. What more do I need to say? Isn't this better compared to some ordinary relationship?"

After hearing my words, Yuni pondered and then her eyes widened.

"So, I'm someone with an incomparable relationship to you?"

"…”

It seemed a bit twisted, but if only considering the meaning, it wasn't far off.

I didn't quibble over it.

If she remained upset, it would take time to appease her…

"So, to you, I'm that kind of person, right?"

"Yeah, let's go with that. So why did you come?"

"Your answer is a bit unsatisfactory. But I'll be kind and let it slide."

Yuni smirked mischievously and leaned closer to me.

I stepped back slightly at Yuni's approach.

Yuni came closer and spoke in a soft voice.

"Right now, you haven't been able to meet Astina, have you?"

"How did you know that?"

I was trying to gather information to meet Astina, but all my attempts had turned into nothing.

I couldn't even request a meeting with Astina, and sending a letter was just as difficult.

I wasn't sure where the problem lay, but it looked impossible to meet Astina through ordinary means.

Yuni spoke confidently.

"It's obvious. That's why I came."

"You?"

"Even though I'm just a princess."

Yuni puffed out her chest.

"I'll arrange a meeting for you."

CHAPTER 213
ASTRIA (5)

A few days after my conversation with Yuni.

"Rudy, it's been a while."

"It has, Father."

My father, Perrian Astria, had arrived at our mansion in the capital.

His splendid golden hair, a testament to the Astria bloodline, stood out.

Despite being middle-aged, he looked remarkably young with his tall stature and vibrant golden hair.

"It's your first visit since you went to the academy, Rudy."

Perrian gestured towards me and then embraced me warmly.

"I should have visited sooner, Father, even with my busy schedule."

"Don't make excuses,"

Perrian chided, prompting smiles from those around us.

To outsiders, we must look like a loving father and son, but the reality is quite different.

Does this man really care for Rudy, just because he's his son?

I think not.

He seems to care for his sons, but in reality, he doesn't pay much attention to either me or Ian.

Perrian isn't at an age to retire yet.

At 50, he's still at his prime in the political arena.

Usually, nobles occupy their positions well into their 60s or even 70s.

But Perrian's desire to retire is due to a secret in the Astria territory.

Necromancers.

The Astria territory harbors necromancers, as Robert has discovered.

Perrian's interest lies solely there.

His retirement is a legitimate way to stay in the Astria territory.

If the head of a family like Astria moves, all nobles take notice.

If Perrian doesn't pass the family to Ian and stays in the territory, it could draw attention to their secret.

By entrusting most of the family matters to Ian, the focus shifts to him.

A retired head usually doesn't attract much attention.

Perrian gained his freedom easily through retirement, freeing himself from any obligations.

No one pays him mind now, so his reputation remains unaffected regardless of his actions.

Even if someone notices something wrong, they dismiss it with, 'He's retired, don't bother about it.'

While I pondered, Perrian asked with a smile,

"Is something the matter?"

"No, nothing…”

"Then let's go inside."

Perrian entered the mansion with a smile.

"Ha, to think Rudy is already learning spatial magic. It feels like just yesterday he was crawling around."

Our destination was the underground library within the mansion.

A place with spatial magic?

Suspicious of a library underground, I thoroughly searched it before Perrian's arrival.

Despite my efforts, I found no trace of spatial magic.

Even when I tried reading the flow of mana, hoping it might be concealed by magic, I found nothing.

Where could it have been hidden?

I watched Perrian's back with suspicion.

"But,"

He suddenly spoke, as if he had eyes on the back of his head.

"Yes?"

"You seem to have changed a lot recently."

Perrian glanced over his shoulder at me.

I responded with a smile.

"One can't remain immature forever. Realizing the shame in my past actions, I've made efforts to change."

"Is that so? As your father, that makes me happy."

His lips smiled, but his eyes did not.

They bore into me, cold and sharp.

It was clear; I was a thorn in Perrian's side.

Mainly due to the people around me and the events unfolding.

Robert, investigating the Astria family.

Astina, declaring war against the rebels.

The Chancellor, aiding us.

It wasn't just them.

Everyone around me had turned against the Astria family.

Gradually, they were tightening the noose around its neck.

Even Perrian, retired from politics, must have felt it.

The current situation was proof.

He was in the uncomfortable position of having to pass on the knowledge of spatial magic to someone practically his enemy.

Still, his ability to maintain composure was admirable.

"Here we are."

Perrian reached out his hand towards a wall.

An ordinary wall.

I checked for mana flows, but felt nothing.

It wasn't a magically concealed wall.

Then, as Perrian reached out, a vortex appeared on the wall.

It grew larger, revealing a new space beyond.

"Follow me,"

he gestured.

Spatial magic.

Perrian had just used spatial magic.

But it was hard to tell where this new space led.

I stepped into the space, finding a small library.

There were only a couple of bookshelves, and a small safe in the corner.

"Ah…"

I read the titles on the bookshelves.

Religions and Deities.

The Relationship Between Time and Space.

History of Astria.

The Underbelly of the Empire.

Books I had never heard of before.

Their titles alone made me apprehensive about their contents.

"Don't touch the books,"

he warned.

"I understand,"

I replied.

The risk of taking a book seemed greater than any potential benefit.

If the risk outweighed the return, it was best not to act.

Perrian opened the small safe in the corner.

Then he took out a bottle containing pills.

"What are those…?"

I asked.

"They are pills. They protect the mind."

Perrian handed me two of the pills.

"Take them."

"Me?"

"They're harmless. Take them. Or don't, if you prefer not to."

He warned me, as if challenging my trust.

If he wanted me dead, he had the means to do so.

As the head of the Astria family, he certainly had the power to kill me, though I wouldn't go down without a fight.

But there seemed no reason for him to prepare these pills just to kill me.

I placed the pills Perrian handed me into my mouth and swallowed them.

"But what effect do they have?"

"I told you. They protect the mind."

"Why do you need to protect my mind?"

"Spatial magic is the essence of the Astria family's spirit. And now, I will transfer that

spirit to you."

"What does that mean…”

Before I could finish my sentence…

"Ah…”

Suddenly, my head started spinning, my vision blurred.

I couldn't control my body properly, and a wave of nausea overcame me.

Unable to steady myself, I collapsed to the ground.

Perrian, watching me intently, reached towards my head.

"Now, I will transfer it to you."

My vision darkened.

My stomach churned.

My head spun.

My body felt heavy with all sorts of discomfort.

"Ugh…”

"Young master! Are you alright?"

"Ugh…”

As I started to retch, a maid beside me handed me a bucket.

"Ugh… Ugh… Ugh…”

I continued to retch into the bucket.

However, nothing came out except for stomach acid, which only made the pain worse.

"Ugh… What in the world…”

I remembered entering a space with Perrian and taking the medicine he gave me…

Then I lost consciousness.

"What's happening… Ugh…”

The continuous retching left me in agony.

If only there was something to vomit, it might not have been so painful, but retching up just stomach acid was excruciating.

"Young master… perhaps you should rinse your mouth."

"Th… thanks."

I rinsed my mouth with the water the maid handed me and spat into the bucket.

The maid took away the bucket and offered me a cup.

"This is warm tea. It should help settle your stomach."

"Alright…”

Following her suggestion, I sipped the tea.

Drinking it helped calm my body and ease the stomach pain.

As my mind cleared a bit, I began to assess the situation.

"What happened?"

"You entered the underground library with the head of the family and then were found unconscious."

"Right… So, where's my father now?"

"The head of the family has already returned to the estate. He left this letter for you to read when you woke up."

"A letter?"

I took the letter from the maid.

In summary, the letter stated that he had passed on the knowledge of spatial magic to me and that I should now train it.

Ian would assist me with the training.

It would be painful for a while, so I should stay in bed.

That was the gist of it.

"Passed on spatial magic?"

There were too many things that didn't make sense.

Moreover, Ian teaching me magic?

That seemed impossible.

I couldn't even meet the Royal army under the current circumstances.

Ian wouldn't come to the mansion just to teach me magic.

And what did he mean by 'passed on'?

Typically, passing on magic means thoroughly teaching both the theory and practice.

But I had only been lying in bed all day, not doing anything.

Perrian didn't leave any magic books either.

And to learn from Ian?

I kept scanning the letter with a sense of futility.

"What is this… Ugh…”

"Get the bucket! The bucket!"

The maid quickly handed me the bucket as I started to retch again.

I vomited the tea I had just drunk.

"Ugh…”

I couldn't seem to grasp the spatial magic, and the physical pain brought tears to my eyes.

Feeling utterly helpless, I murmured to myself.

"What's going on here…”

CHAPTER 214
ASTRIA (6)

“……Hmm."

Yuni looked at her reflection in the mirror, taking in her attire.

"This looks good enough."

At Yuni's contented smile, those behind her exhaled sighs of relief.

"So, you'll go with this dress?"

"Yes, this one."

The maid observed Yuni intently.

The dress was more modest and cute than flashy, fitting for lower nobility young ladies.

It suited Yuni well, but it was vastly different from her usual attire.

Yuni typically wore more elaborate and mature-looking dresses.

Being younger than her rival, Rie, a contender for the Royal throne, she chose her dresses to not fall behind in appearance.

However, the dress Yuni now donned was more suitable for a young girl.

It was almost like casual wear and accentuated Yuni's cuteness.

Undoubtedly, this dress complemented Yuni much better than her usual choices.

Her personal maid cocked her head in puzzlement.

Yuni had always disliked such cute dresses.

Her every action and choice of clothing were influenced by Rie, aiming to match her.

What had prompted this change of heart?

Yuni seemed to be searching for clothes that showcased her at her best.

She moved around, examining her reflection in the mirror.

'She has changed a lot,' the maid thought.

Having been by Yuni's side since childhood, she had always noticed the smallest changes in her.

But never had she witnessed such a drastic transformation.

The harshness had left her eyes, replaced only by the innocence seen in her younger years.

Whatever had happened at the Academy, it was a positive change.

"Miss Yuni, I will add some accessories for you."

"Yes, pick something pretty."

"Certainly."

The maid chose a fitting accessory from those prepared and approached Yuni's hair.

"By the way, who are you meeting today?"

"A senior I met at the Academy. They've been very helpful, so I've decided to help them in return today."

The maid's eyes widened at Yuni's words.

Yuni never openly acknowledged receiving help due to her strong pride.

Yet, here she was, speaking so casually about it, which was surprising.

'This person must be the one who changed Miss Yuni…… ' the maid thought, smiling

warmly.

Though she didn't know if the person was male or female, she believed they must be someone good.

Yuni wasn't easy to care for.

She always did as she pleased, never voicing her discomforts.

Being able to help Yuni meant understanding her well.

"Dressing up like this suggests…"

It was probably for a man.

If it were for another woman, Yuni would have preferred a more comfortable outfit instead of dressing up.

Of course, it could be otherwise, but her intuition, honed by years as a maid, told her it was a man.

Especially since rumors had been circulating about Rie having a man in her life recently.

Now, with Yuni giving off an aura as if she too had a man in her life, the passage of time felt starkly evident.

It felt like a mother sending off her daughter to marriage, but seeing Yuni's current situation, she was more overjoyed than lonely.

"Miss Yuni."

"Hmm?"

"Now is the time for you to find your own happiness! Not swayed by others, but happiness that's truly yours!"

Yuni looked at her with a puzzled expression.

"What do you mean?"

"You'll understand my words as you grow older!"

It was a word of encouragement for Yuni, who had always been chasing after Rie's shadow.

However, there was something she was overlooking.

The person Yuni was going to meet was Rudy…

And who Rie was fond of…

'I wonder if the senior will like this.'

Unaware of her concerns, Yuni was beaming with a bright smile.

The day of my appointment with Yuni arrived.

“…Senior, are you alright?"

"No…”

My stomach churned, and the headache wouldn't ease.

I considered postponing my meeting with Yuni due to my poor health, but eventually decided against it.

I had made many efforts, but entering the Royal army had been impossible.

I didn't know what efforts Yuni had made, but they must not have been easy.

I couldn't disregard Yuni's efforts just because I was feeling a bit unwell.

Yuni looked at me with worried eyes and then clenched her fist.

"Then let's meet quickly and return. If it becomes too much, I'll make sure you don't overdo it, so be ready."

"Alright. Thanks."

Yuni, looking spirited, boarded the carriage with me, and we set off.

Contrary to my worries that the swaying of the carriage would worsen my nausea, the ride was surprisingly smooth.

Whether it was a royal carriage or Yuni had arranged for a good one, I couldn’t tell, but I was able to relax comfortably.

As I half-reclined, Yuni broke the silence.

"Ian… why are you meeting that person?"

"My father left some business unfinished, so I'm going to hand over the follow-up work."

“…What do you mean?"

I had received the transmission of spatial magic from Perrian.

However, I couldn't use it.

I didn’t even know what was transmitted or the content of it.

All I knew was that I had 'received' it.

With just this knowledge, there was nothing I could do.

Even though I had experienced some future events as my future self, I couldn't apply it now.

Without the basics, reaching advanced levels was impossible.

I needed fundamental education.

Perrian had clearly instructed me to learn from Ian, so I was seeking him out.

"Why did you dress up like this, though? You could have worn something more comfortable."

I squinted at Yuni.

Although she wore a simple dress, which could be considered ordinary, our destination was practically a training ground.

It was a place where conscripted Royal soldiers trained, and commanders occupied.

A place more fitting for a uniform or casual attire than a dress.

"Oh… Senior, I thought you weren't very observant, but how did you notice I dressed up?"

"…"

Yuni misunderstood my intent.

When I mentioned dressing up, I was referring to the dress itself, but Yuni took it as meaning she had put effort into her appearance.

"So, do I look pretty? Is this the style you like?"

Yuni twirled her dress and lifted the corners of her mouth.

"Yes, you look pretty. Well-dressed."

Continuing the conversation would only exacerbate my headache and nausea, so I let the conversation drift without much engagement.

"Hmm~. Alright. I'll make sure to come in a similar style whenever I meet you, Senior."

"Okay… Thanks."

"Princess, we're almost there."

While we were exchanging idle chatter, the carriage arrived at the location of the Royal army.

Outside the capital's walls, right in front was a small building of a very unique design.

It was closely attached to the wall, with an empty plaza in front of it.

On this vacant plaza, numerous soldiers were engaged in training.

Initially, I thought being outside the city walls might pose security or enemy threats, but seeing the situation, it seemed my worries were unfounded.

Despite its small size, the building was heavily guarded with many soldiers around, making it impossible to infiltrate.

The reason for their stationing here began to make sense.

Inside the city, there would be insufficient space for training, and the presence of nobles would disrupt the soldiers' training routine.

Stationed outside, all these problems were solved.

"Who goes there?"

As the carriage approached, a soldier came up to us. Yuni opened the window and looked at him.

"I am Yuni Von Ristonia, the Second Princess of the Empire."

At Yuni's words, the soldier's eyes widened, and he quickly bowed.

"My apologies. Please, go right in."

Following the soldier’s guidance, the carriage moved into the encampment.

"But how did you manage to set up this meeting? I tried everything and couldn’t manage it."

"There’s a special way to do it."

“…And what is that way?"

"Um… It’s a bit complicated to explain right now… Oh, but Senior, you already know about it. I just played a little trick with that matter."

I tilted my head in confusion.

A matter I knew about that could grant access here?

No part of it seemed to make sense to me.

Did Yuni have some sort of leverage over the nobles?

"Princess, we've arrived at the building."

"Ah, right. Thanks. Here."

Yuni extended her hand to me.

"Let's get down."

"Am I some princess now? Why the escort?"

"You're unwell. I can at least help you out this much. If you don't want it, just say so."

There was no reason to refuse her help, especially when I was struggling to keep myself upright.

"…Alright. Help me out."

"If only you were this cooperative from the start."

Yuni teased me with a mischievous smile and extended her hand.

I accepted her help to get up.

"Ugh…"

However, Yuni couldn't fully support my weight.

As I wobbled with dizziness, I nearly collapsed onto her.

"Yikes… Senior, why are you so heavy?"

"If you're going to complain, don't bother helping."

"Hey, I'm offering my help here. Don't make me feel bad."

Yuni grumbled playfully as I took her support to get out of the carriage.

Then, as we were getting out.

“…Rudy?"

I lifted my head at the sound of my name.

A woman with neatly tied red hair and wearing a uniform was staring at us in surprise.

“…Astina?"

Astina was looking at us with a surprised expression.

CHAPTER 215
ASTRIA (7)

"Oh my, Astina. Hello."

Yuni greeted with a bright smile.

"Oh…"

Astina looked at Yuni with an interested expression, but her gaze carried a sharp edge.

Just being nearby made my body tingle.

The sight of Yuni half-embracing me was more than troubling, it was serious.

To resolve the situation, I quickly separated from Yuni and spoke up.

"Astina, it's been a while…"

"It's been a while? It doesn't seem like it. Was it just a few weeks?"

"Ha ha… Isn't that long enough? How have you been?"

"I've been fine. You seem to have been doing well too,"

She said sharply.

"I've been unwell, dizzy and…"

"Then you might need a more comfortable place."

Astina reached out her hand towards me.

Then she spoke.

"Gravity."

"Huh?"

"Senior?"

I was taken aback by the sudden magic.

I floated in the air, and Yuni, beside me, looked bewildered.

Astina, with a kind smile, turned to Yuni.

"The little miss has her own matters, doesn't she? Someone is waiting for her inside."

"Li, little miss? No, more importantly, I was going to go with Rudy. He needs to be there too…"

"You didn't tell us that."

"I said I had a companion."

"You said you had a companion, not that they had to be with you in the conversation."

"Ugh…"

Yuni stepped back at Astina's words.

"I'll take good care of your companion, so you go do your thing."

"No."

Yuni answered firmly.

"Rudy also has something to say to the commander. It's more efficient if we handle our business together."

Is she referring to Ian as the commander?

Why did she come to meet Ian?

Before I could express my confusion, Astina spoke.

"Efficient?"

Astina approached Yuni with a cold air.

"This is a military place. There are things more important than efficiency here. It's different from the academy and the royal palace you're used to."

After saying that, Astina looked at the soldiers around us.

"Escort the princess to where the commander is."

Having given the orders, Astina began to lead me inside the building.

"Hey, senior! Rudy!"

As I moved further away, Yuni cried out in despair.

I couldn't look after Yuni in such a situation.

Although I was grateful to Yuni for bringing me here, I couldn't dare to stop Astina.

I floated into the building, suspended by Astina's magic.

Astina placed me beside her, giving me a sharp look.

"Did you come to brag about having a girlfriend or something?"

"Of course not…"

"Then what brings you here? You said you were unwell."

"Could you please put me down? I won't run away."

At my request, Astina sighed and gently lowered me to the ground.

Once on the floor, I opened the bag I had brought with me.

"First, please take this."

I took a box out of the bag, and Astina frowned as she looked at it.

"What's this?"

"Please open it."

Inside the box was Astina's nameplate.

Astina Persia, President of the Liberion Student Council.

The letters were precisely engraved.

"What if you had lost it? That would have been careless."

Astina's eyes lingered on the nameplate, filled with longing, and her lips curved into a pleased smile.

"I had completely forgotten about it."

"Will you keep looking angry even after I've taken the trouble to bring this to you?"

"When have I ever looked angry?"

A warm smile spread across Astina's face.

Seeing Astina smile like that made me feel good too.

I didn't mind the imposing Astina, but she looked best with a calm smile like this.

With a smile still on her face, Astina narrowed her eyes at me.

"But, you didn't come here just to bring this, did you? Especially not when you're unwell?"

Her frown was there, but the atmosphere was different from before.

"Of course not. I came to talk about various things."

"Really?"

Astina laughed playfully at my response.

"I bet you were more pleased to see a certain face there."

“…Huh?"

"You might be good at winning over girls, but understanding their hearts is another matter."

“…Winning over girls?"

"Enough of that. If there's business, let's get to it."

Astina opened the door to a room marked 'Deputy Commander's Office.'

The room was plainly furnished with just a desk and a table for guests, devoid of any other decorations.

It was typical of Astina not to add decorative items, but the emptiness felt stark.

Astina sat down at the guest table in front.

"So, what did you come to talk about?"

I sat opposite Astina and began.

"I wanted to check on your well-being and perhaps offer some advice on any troubles you might have."

"Well-being is one thing, but troubles?"

"Is it wrong to come for advice?"

"There's nothing wrong with it, but to come all this way?"

Astina seemed perplexed, fidgeting with her lips.

I continued with a smile.

"More importantly, how have you been?"

"That's the same question you asked earlier."

"But I didn't get a proper answer. Do you find your role in the Royal army suits you?"

"It's just so-so. I thought I would fit in well with the military, but its oppressive atmosphere doesn't really appeal to me."

"The rebels will be targeting you, Astina."

I shifted the tone, speaking earnestly.

Astina's expression hardened at my sudden serious remark.

"I know."

"Did you join the Royal army because of what I said about the future? Is that why you made this choice?"

"The rebels are a threat to the empire. You know that as well as I do. Someone had to do it."

"But it didn't have to be you, Astina."

I looked at Astina with concern.

"Did you make this choice because I said you might die?"

"Yes…"

"It could have been something that never happened."

"But it could have."

"Weren't there other options?"

"I believed it was the best way."

"Because of me?"

I asked cautiously.

"Did you make this choice because if a situation arises where you could die, it would put me in danger too? And because I would try to change the future, is that why you did this?"

The reason Astina joined the Royal army.

Considering her character, it was easy to understand.

Astina would not burden others, even if she collapsed from overwork.

She feels responsible for the issues of those around her and gives her best to help.

That's who Astina is.

Being in the Royal army meant we couldn't help her directly, and it was harder to reach out to her.

Protected by the empire, but in a position where she had to confront the rebels head-on, she was at greater risk.

Yet, Astina chose to join the Royal army.

She confronted the rebels head-on and took the position of deputy commander.

She chose a path where she faced greater danger, but it made those around her safer.

Being in the Royal army meant there was nothing we could do to help directly.

"It's an overestimation of your importance. I made this choice for my own safety."

I swallowed the words I was about to say.

Further discussion would only confuse Astina.

Knowing only the outcome of the future, I couldn't say more to Astina.

But, I wanted to convey the commitment I had made after seeing her future.

"Astina, just remember this."

I had already seen Astina's future and made a promise to myself.

"If you're ever in danger, Astina, I will come to your rescue. I will save you, no matter what."

Astina looked surprised at first, then blushed and averted her eyes.

"You flirtatious guy. It's because you say things like that, women get attracted to you."

"Flirtatious? I…"

Astina, grumbling a bit, looked at me and smiled warmly.

"Still, hearing you say such things does reassure me."

Astina took a deep breath.

"For you, who speaks like this, I promise I'll never let myself die."

"Don't worry, even if you're in danger, I'll be there to stop it."

"Thank you, I'm counting on you."

Astina shifted her posture and looked intently at my face.

"So, shall we talk about your concerns? I can't stand being in debt, so I'll help you resolve your worries."

"My concern…"

I hesitated for a moment.

Did I speak too hastily about having a concern?

If I talk about my worries here, won't that just burden Astina?

Then Astina glared at me.

"You're not planning to just resolve my concerns and keep yours to yourself, are you?"

"Is that being underhanded?"

I let out a wry laugh at Astina's words.

I thought about glossing over my concerns, but it didn't seem like Astina would let it slide that easily.

Or maybe she'd try to figure out my worries without my knowledge.

It would be better to speak frankly here.

I opened my mouth quietly.

"It's about the Astria family."

Astina looked at me with keen interest.

CHAPTER 216
ASTRIA (8)

"Are you saying you're giving up your claim to the throne?"

"I thought about it alone at the academy, and I just really don't want to do it~. So, I decided not to."

Yuni spoke with a lively tone, but to Ian, it sounded like a bolt from the blue.

Ian grasped his head and looked at Yuni.

"Did Rudy put you up to this?"

He knew that Yuni and Rudy had a good relationship at the academy.

Now that she had brought Rudy to the army, Ian couldn't help but suspect him.

Yuni opened her mouth with a puzzled look.

"Rudy has nothing to do with it."

Yuni's decision to give up the succession was because she thought Rie was more suited for the emperor's position.

As she pondered this, Yuni furrowed her brow.

“…Maybe not? It seems there might be a little connection."

Rudy's influence was not entirely absent in her decision.

She chose to give up after seeing many people superior to herself and understanding their efforts.

Seeing people put in tremendous effort every day, she decided to give up, with Rie and Rudy being examples.

In a way, Rudy was not entirely unrelated.

But Ian had no way of knowing this.

He only knew the result without understanding the process in the middle.

He saw it merely as an action by Rudy to keep him in check.

Ian clenched his teeth.

'Rudy Astria… '

His plan to make Yuni a puppet emperor and sit atop the empire himself was unraveling.

But the impact wasn't significant yet.

Rather, the greater impact was entering the competition for succession with Rudy.

Ian's worries deepened.

'At this rate… '

He didn't know what his father would do.

Ian had seen Perrian's plan.

Mana stones condensed with the mana of tens, hundreds of people.

Using these mana stones for magic, the capital of the empire could be blown away.

Ian just wanted to rise to the top of the empire through official means.

What meaning would there be in sitting atop a crumbling empire?

Essentially, that would not be gaining the empire but building a new nation on top of a fallen one.

That was not what Ian wanted.

So, he planned to take over the empire in his own way and show it to his father.

If he took over the empire, there would be no need to destroy it.

But his plans were increasingly going awry.

At this rate, he would lose the justification and means to stop his father.

Ian stared intently at Yuni.

"So, are you planning to announce your renunciation of the succession officially?"

"Officially?"

Yuni tilted her head.

She hadn't thought that far.

Yuni's reason for making such a statement to Ian was an action she took because Rudy wanted to enter the army.

It wasn't a planned move.

"Hmm… I guess I have to do it? It's something I'll have to face eventually, right?"

Ian stroked his chin at Yuni's nonchalant shrug.

"Delay it a bit."

If he couldn't make Yuni a puppet, taking the head of the family's position would be meaningless.

With Rie and Astina, along with others, combining their strengths, they were no less powerful than the Astrias.

So, the timing had to be pushed back.

Without an official announcement, she could still change her mind later.

And if she doesn't, he could force her to change it.

How to do it could be decided after securing the head of the family's position.

"After the head of the Astrias is decided, then make the official announcement."

"Sure, whatever… It doesn't matter to me."

Yuni nodded.

Even if the timing was delayed, she had already told the people around her, and there was nothing Ian could do if she decided to announce it anyway.

So, in front of Ian, she just agreed to some extent.

"Well then, since my business here is done, I'll be going. Good luck with the succession competition!"

Yuni briskly stood up and waved her hand.

As she opened the door, two people were standing in front of it.

Yuni narrowed her eyes and glared at them.

“…Isn't that Rudy, who left me behind?"

"What could I have done there? Did you expect me to fight with Astina?"

In front of Yuni were Rudy and Astina.

They had come to find Ian after finishing their conversation in Astina's room.

Seeing them, Ian pressed his temples, looking extremely tired after hearing Yuni's shocking statement.

"Weren't you here to see Astina?"

"No, I also had business with my brother."

"Are you talking to me?"

Rudy slowly entered the room.

"Sit. I'll at least offer you a cup of tea."

"No, thank you. It's not something that needs a long conversation."

"Suit yourself. So, what is it?"

Rudy stood confidently in front of Ian.

"I've received training in spatial magic from father."

Veins throbbed on Ian's forehead.

"Did you come here to brag?"

"No. Father had something to say after the training."

"Father did?"

At Ian's question, Rudy opened his mouth.

"He said I should learn spatial magic from you. So, I thought you would teach me."

"Ha."

Ian looked at Rudy with an incredulous face.

The audacity was unbelievable.

Did he think Ian would teach him just because he came here?

It was preposterous.

Spatial magic is the spirit and pillar of the Astria family.

Mastering it proves the legitimacy of a successor and provides a standard for comparison with heads of the family from other generations.

Who would teach something so crucial to their rival in competition?

Ian was about to flatly refuse, losing his composure, but then he paused, pondering.

Refusing here would provide Rudy with an excuse to seek training elsewhere.

Since the empire demanded a fair competition for succession, any unfairness could lead to objections.

"I'm currently occupying the commander's position, so I can't teach frequently."

He devised an alternative plan.

"Once a month, I'll visit the mansion to teach."

Teaching Rudy once a month was the idea, but he had no intention of teaching properly.

Although his father had passed on spatial magic, Rudy wouldn't be able to use it.

Spatial magic wasn't an easy art, and without proper training, even if it's passed on, the basics would remain elusive.

Passing on Astria's magic wasn't just transferring knowledge, but about the fundamental conditions needed to use the magic.

Just like being allowed to use a sword doesn't mean one can wield it properly, spatial magic couldn't be used without proper training.

Furthermore, the once-a-month condition was set to keep an eye on Rudy.

On the off chance Rudy miraculously managed to handle spatial magic, Ian would be there to respond by visiting once a month.

Rudy frowned at Ian's words.

He couldn't argue though.

It wasn't reasonable to ask for more education from a rival who was also the commander.

"Understood. Could I at least get some books related to spatial magic?"

"There are no books on spatial magic, nor should they be created."

“…What?"

"Spatial magic is only verbally passed from user to user. There's absolutely no record of it."

Rudy looked at Ian in disbelief.

"What happens then if all the users die? Does spatial magic just vanish?"

Ian didn't respond to that.

He got up from his seat.

"I have other matters to attend to, so I can't stay any longer."

Ian said and walked towards the door.

"I'll drop by next week. Until then, ponder over it yourself."

“…Understood."

Rudy watched Ian with a dissatisfied expression, clearly unhappy with the arrangement.

After Yuni and Rudy left, a noisy commotion erupted among the soldiers.

It was a natural reaction given the sudden visit of the duke's heir and the empire's princess.

Astina was trying to quell the commotion as much as possible while returning to her room.

"Deputy Commander!"

A soldier hurried towards Astina.

He was in charge of overseeing the military's entries and exits.

"What's the matter?"

"Well… a gift has arrived for the Deputy Commander."

"A gift?"

"It was sent by Astria, who visited today."

Astina tilted her head in confusion.

"Why didn't you send it to my room? Why bring it to me?"

“…It's not just one or two items, ma'am."

Puzzled, Astina walked towards the entrance.

There, two carriages awaited her.

"What is this about?"

"Well… these are the items sent by Astria, but…”

"What items are we talking about?"

"Some furniture and plants. A rocking chair, Sansevieria plants, and also some disposable items like candles. Here's the inventory list; would you like to see it?"

The coachman earnestly replied and handed over the list of items.

Astina slowly read through the inventory.

"Why would he send all this…”

"And he asked me to give this to you…”

The coachman pulled out a neatly folded note from his pocket.

It was a small note, carefully stored in an envelope.

[Your room seemed quite bare. I've sent a few things you might need. Consider it a token of my gratitude for solving my problem. Please accept them.]

It was a brief letter.

A pleased smile stretched across Astina's face as she read the note, reading it over several times.

Realizing where she was, Astina coughed a few times and looked at the soldiers in front of her.

"Move these things to my room. I'll tell you later how to arrange them."

“…Yes, ma'am!"

The soldiers, used to seeing Astina's stern demeanor, were taken aback by her smiling face.

"Handle them with care."

"Yes, ma'am!"

As the soldiers began to move the items, Astina looked back at the note, smiling contentedly to herself.

CHAPTER 217
ASTRIA (9)

I sat at my desk, gazing at an envelope.

Lately, I've been receiving many letters.

Some were from people hoping to curry favor with me in case I inherited the Astria family estate.

While others were inviting me to their mansions to get to know me better.

I've been getting all sorts of letters.

I mostly ignored them.

If they were from people related to the Astria family, I would have paid attention, but no such letters came.

The Astria family's people have been aligned with Ian for a long time.

Knowing the family situation, none showed interest in me.

Those already in a pact with Ian wouldn't bother sending me letters.

Besides, it wouldn't look good for me to be exchanging letters with them, given Ian's precarious position.

So, only mediocre opportunists sent me letters, while substantial figures stayed away.

However, this letter was different.

Astina may be young, but she's been in a similar position as mine since childhood.

Having strived hard for the heir's position, I thought she might have some good

advice.

And indeed, Astina suggested something valuable.

A gathering of Liberion Academy alumni.

She recommended that I attend.

Connections through school, locality, and blood have always been the strongest ties.

Though not an alumnus yet, there was no reason I couldn't go.

After all, it's a place frequented by former academy attendees.

Some might even be interested in hearing from a yet-to-graduate student like me.

Especially since I've just finished my duties as the student council president - a fresh talent for them.

I could share a lot about the academy and be welcomed.

If only I weren't Rudy Astria…

Among the alumni are several notable figures.

They had no reason to approach me.

Getting politically entangled with me would only be a headache for them.

But among them, there was someone I could approach.

"Go to that gathering and look for Yurik Astria," Astina had advised.

Yurik Astria.

He was my uncle.

Perrian Astria's brother, a collateral noble, having lost in the competition for succession.

"Will he help me?"

"I can't guarantee it, but it's not impossible. He was in a similar position as you."

When persuading people, appeal to emotions rather than logic.

One of the basic principles of marketing.

Now is the time to sell myself to people.

Having someone with a similar experience and a blood relation was enough to stir emotions.

"Master Rudy, it's time to start getting ready."

"Understood."

I rose from my desk and began dressing.

The gathering place for the alumni was a ball.

Not a small ball like those at the academy, but a grand one attended by numerous nobles.

The ball wasn't just for alumni; it also included people brought by the graduates.

Thus, it was going to be a large-scale event.

I started dressing for the occasion.

"It seems we're a bit late in preparing. Weren't you supposed to go with someone else?"

"It's fine. There's no need to arrive exactly on time."

People like Ian or my father often attend such balls from the very beginning.

For higher nobility, arriving early was considered a virtue.

I carry the name of Astria, but in reality, people might not even know I'm attending.

In that case, it's better to arrive a bit late and attract attention.

The maids couldn't have known my thoughts.

Neither Ian nor my father had ever been in my situation.

"Do the people you're going with know about this?"

"Yes, I've already informed them."

The person I planned to go with was Luna.

I had considered going with Rie, but knowing that the princess's presence would draw more attention to her than to me, I decided to go with Luna instead.

Dressed, I headed to the waiting carriage.

"Let's go to the Royal Magic Tower."

“…The Royal Magic Tower?"

The coachman's eyes widened at my instruction.

"Bu-but you can't enter the Royal Magic Tower without prior permission!"

I frowned.

“…Do you think I wouldn't know that?"

"Ahem! My apologies!"

This coachman was different from the one I met last time, displaying an impudent attitude.

Perhaps because he's from our family's staff?

Being employed directly by the estate, he seemed to somewhat disdain me.

Maybe it's time to deal with the people here at the estate.

Currently, neither my father nor Ian lives here.

And it's likely to stay the same while I'm here.

That means I need to turn the people inside into my allies.

An internal enemy is more frightening than an external one.

"What now?"

“…Excuse me?"

"Aren't we going to depart?"

"Y-yes, right away!"

I sighed.

A few minutes later, the carriage was swiftly nearing the Royal Magic Tower.

Though called a tower, it wasn't actually one.

In fact, the term 'Magic Tower' referred not to a specific tower but to a facility where wizards conducted their research.

Surrounding it were trees, their bare branches signaling winter.

As we approached the Magic Tower, a few guards were conducting checks.

“Um… Master Rudy?”

“I know.”

At the coachman's remark, I opened the window.

A guard stood before it.

“Who are you?”

“I am Rudy Astria. I'm here to meet someone at the Magic Tower.”

The guard, with a businesslike demeanor, picked up a piece of paper.

“Could you please tell me the name of the person you're meeting?”

“Luna Railer. She’s an academy student here as an apprentice to the royal wizards.”

The guard's eyes widened.

“Oh! You're here to meet Miss Luna! My apologies!”

“What?”

“Please, go right in! Miss Luna is waiting for you!”

I was puzzled at the guard's welcoming attitude.

Why did it feel like they were rolling out the red carpet?

Was it just my imagination?

But as I entered the Magic Tower, my doubts turned to certainty.

“Rudy, it's been a while…”

Luna, dressed in a white gown with floral ornaments in her hair, radiated an almost fairy-like aura.

She had the kind of appearance that captivated everyone's attention.

However, my gaze drifted more towards the people around her.

“Go Luna!”

“Luna, be careful… If any strange guys approach, run away…”

Among them were an elderly grandfather and what looked like a researcher in his thirties.

“Please, everyone, go inside!!”

Luna, her face flushed, was yelling at them.

“Luna, what's the matter… Have we done something wrong?”

“Is it… puberty?”

“No, it’s not that! I’m about to leave with Rudy…”

“Come back early… And don’t even think about touching alcohol!”

They were fussing over Luna like worried parents.

In just a few days, she had fostered a family-like atmosphere, which left me feeling bewildered.

As I watched the scene with a baffled expression, an elderly man approached me.

“You must be Rudy…”

“Yes?”

“You're confident you can protect Luna, right? Especially in such a dangerous place?”

“Dangerous place?”

I was going to a ball, frequented by well-known families.

There was nothing dangerous about it.

“We’re just going to a ball…”

“That's what I mean! Do you know how dangerous a ball can be! Standing alone in a corner nibbling on cake! Becoming the laughing stock of the nobles! The mental shock is like smelling someone who hasn’t showered for a week!”

“Ah… Right.”

It seemed balls were terrifying events for introverted wizards.

“Rudy, let's go! Hurry!”

Luna grabbed my arm and pulled me along.

As she was about to board the carriage, she paused to look back.

"…I'll be back soon!"

"Heh heh!"

"To hear such a farewell… It's been a while…"

The grandfathers beamed with joy at Luna's 'I'll be back soon.'

"Let's go, Rudy."

"Yes, let's."

"It seems like you're getting along well with the people at the Magic Tower."

"Am I really getting along well?"

"Of course. You've just arrived, and you're already fitting in so well."

The grandfathers' fussing was a bit much, but it was clear they cared deeply for Luna.

I had been quietly worried about Luna becoming a royal wizard.

Royal wizards, although part of the same institution, often act individually.

I wondered if Luna, coming from a strong individualistic culture, would adapt well.

But seeing her now, my worries seemed unfounded; she was adapting better than I expected.

"But more importantly! You're meeting your uncle today, right?"

"Yes, my uncle…"

"Am I presentable enough? They say first impressions are crucial…"

"Hmm?"

“Oh… I’m so nervous… I need to make a good impression on your uncle… That way, your family will hear good things about me…”

Luna seemed as if she was preparing for a meet-the-family type of event.

I hadn’t explained much to her, so her interpretation was unexpected…

“Luna… I don’t know much about my uncle.”

“Huh?”

“It’s almost like meeting him for the first time.”

“Meeting your uncle for the first time?”

Her eyes widened in surprise.

“I might have seen him when I was very young.”

“How can that be? We see our relatives almost once a month…”

“Every family is different. I don’t know the details.”

My guess was that it had something to do with succession.

When a child isn’t chosen as the heir, they are often ostracized to prevent further disputes.

It may seem harsh to cast out one’s own child, but in reality, it’s often for the best for everyone involved.

As the head of a family, having a sibling within the household could be a source of conflict.

Thus, the options are often to harm or exile them.

From a father’s perspective, exiling a child who isn’t the heir is a way to save both children.

Luna tilted her head, puzzled.

“So why are you suddenly meeting your uncle?”

I slowly answered her question.

It’s part of the process of inheriting the family position.

I need to bring the Astria vassals to my side.

Although my uncle is considered a collateral relative, that’s only if he were an ordinary noble.

My uncle is…

“He’s someone with extensive connections. He’s friendly with many people and is quite well-known in social circles.”

For a noble who didn’t become the head, this was an unusual path.

He has friendly relations with many people, including those in politics, without any political agenda.

I planned to seek help from my uncle’s network.

“Oh…”

Luna frowned, looking at me.

“A sociable Rudy…”

She bit her lip, mumbling to herself with evident distaste.

“A blonde delinquent…”

“He’s older and part of the noble society, so he won’t be like that.”

I too had imagined my uncle like Luna did, but I firmly denied it.

“We’ll see what he's like when we meet him.”

I looked out the window.

Outside, the ballroom was slowly coming into view.

CHAPTER 218
ASTRIA (10)

"Wow…”

Luna, in awe, looked around the ballroom corridor.

Her eyes wide open, Luna's demeanor resembled that of a puppy exploring a new place.

The building's interior was adorned with decorations too valuable to be estimated in money.

I was amazed myself, so I understood why Luna was acting this way.

"Luna, let's start heading in."

"Uh, okay!"

Luna, who had been gazing around, quickly came up behind me.

"This place is really incredible… I wonder how much they spent."

"Indeed…”

The ballroom is located in the center of the capital.

Considering the land value here and the decorations in the ballroom, it was clear a astronomical sum was spent on it.

Although it was not a big issue since the ballroom is operated directly by the country, not built by any particular family, the extravagance was still astounding.

As we walked around admiring the place, we arrived at the entrance of the ballroom.

"Welcome!"

A waiter holding a small tray approached us at the entrance.

"Are both of you on the guest list?"

"Yes, Rudy Astria and Luna Railer."

Though there was a guest list, the question was somewhat redundant.

All graduates of the Academy were invited.

Including the students.

They had a list of all those people, but it wasn't practical to check everyone.

In any case, at the ballroom, people usually interacted only with those they knew, so it didn't really matter if someone unknown entered.

Moreover, for Academy graduates to come here intending to cause trouble was practically a suicide mission.

That's why the ball was open and welcoming.

The waiter, after noting our names, opened the doors to the ballroom.

"Please go in. Have a great time."

As the doors opened, a bright light enveloped us.

Inside, there were numerous people and dazzling decorations.

On the tables were cakes and various desserts, and people were gathered, holding wine glasses and chatting.

"Hmm?"

"Who are those kids?"

Some people tilted their heads in curiosity upon seeing us.

They looked at us, intrigued by the unfamiliar faces.

"Who are you?"

"Are you this year's graduates? No, the graduation ceremony hasn't happened yet, so you're not, right?"

"Well, that aside, you're so cute! What are your names?"

Contrary to what I heard about the place not welcoming strangers, people started to gather around us.

Perhaps they were welcoming new faces because it was the graduation season?

I couldn't be sure.

The problem was…

"What's this…"

"Oh dear, this little lady seems scared."

"We won't hurt you. We're your seniors."

Luna was surrounded by women who appeared to be in their thirties.

Luna stepped back, seemingly frightened by the sudden attention.

I stood in front of her protectively.

"Ru, Rudy."

"She's a bit scared,"

I explained.

"Oh my, is he your boyfriend? Ho ho, he's cute too."

"This boy is adorable too~. Shall I gobble him up?"

Startled by the seniors' remarks, Luna clung tightly to my arm and pulled me back.

"No, you can't. Rudy is…”

"Oh, look at them!"

"She's trembling with fear but claiming the boy as hers? Too cute~."

"Uh, no, it's not like that…”

Luna was at a loss, overwhelmed by the ladies' teasing.

While it was nice to be the center of attention, this situation was becoming uncomfortable.

What I needed was to connect with one or two individuals who could introduce me to my uncle.

With so many people crowding around, it was just a waste of time and made it harder to slip away.

"Hmm…”

A man in the crowd studied me intently.

He was a neat-looking man with glasses.

"Do I know you? Why do you look familiar?"

"As if you'd know him! You're in your thirties. How could this young-faced boy have been at the Academy with you?"

"Well, I might have seen him on a Homecoming Day or something."

The man started to grumble at the woman's teasing.

Then he looked at me again, suddenly clapping his hands.

“…Astria?"

"What?"

"Why bring up that family now? It's spoiling the mood."

"It must be the Astria family's…"

As the man spoke, all eyes turned towards me.

There was a sense of curiosity about Luna's and my sudden appearance.

"Who are you?"

I answered the question.

"My name is Rudy Astria. And this is Luna Railer."

"Ah…"

"…"

It was like a stone had been thrown into a still pond, creating ripples.

Some faces turned pale, while others quickly stepped back.

"That's… the Astria family we know of…"

"Rudy Astria, isn't he that notorious second son?"

"Hey, that was just a rumor. He's competing with Ian Astria for the heir position. A real deal."

Whispers of both praise and sarcasm filled the air.

But everyone's visible reaction was the same.

The people who had been joking around began to step back, distancing themselves from us.

"Uh…"

Luna looked both relieved and perplexed as people dispersed.

It was a natural response, given that people distanced themselves just from our introduction.

Before everyone left, I managed to catch one person.

"Excuse me, I have a question."

"So, sorry. I'm actually very busy!"

The person I grabbed made an excuse and quickly pulled away from me.

All the people who had gathered around us began to distance themselves, warily watching me.

“…This is troublesome."

So many people had crowded around us, only to disappear in an instant.

I understood to some extent.

Although this was a gathering of graduates, it was at the heart of the political arena.

They avoided getting close to me, not wanting to fall out of favor with Ian Astria.

There were nobles from the Emperor's faction, but none who truly believed in me.

Even though I had become known as a supporter of the Emperor's faction within the Astria family, the Emperor's faction supported the Emperor, not every member of it.

Getting close to me would be risky for them, especially if Ian ended up inheriting the family.

While I understood their behavior, it still felt disappointing.

After all, I had worked hard at the academy, yet there was no one to support me.

"Isn't everyone being too harsh…?"

Luna seemed to agree, pouting her lips.

"How can they change their attitude just because of a name?"

"What can we do? It's the situation."

Regardless of the situation, our task remained unchanged.

I didn't know my uncle's face.

He wasn't at the main house, but at a mansion in the capital, so there was no portrait of him.

We needed to find my uncle, but…

"Luna, shall we split up and look for him?"

It might be a burden for the socially awkward Luna, but it was necessary.

If I stayed, people would just run away.

I had to trust Luna.

"Leave it to me…! I'll give it a try!"

Luna, realizing this, clenched her fist and responded.

I smiled at Luna's cute determination and continued.

"We'll look for my uncle and ask the people around."

"Can we really find him?"

"It's somewhat possible. The Astria family's hair color is not common."

The Astria family's notable feature was their blond hair.

The gold in the hair of the royal family and the Astria family was closer to a true golden color, unlike other blondes.

Such radiant blond hair was rare in other families.

"So… we're looking for a sociable person with blond hair!"

"Yeah, he should be in his fifties."

"Got it! I'll do my best!"

So, we split up and asked around.

But no one was willing to help us.

Having already attracted attention once, the rumor quickly spread throughout the ballroom.

Even though we were just looking for one person, people refused to answer.

I understood why the Wizard Tower considered this a fearful place.

People drew lines so sharply.

Despite our sense of camaraderie as members of the academy, people kept their distance.

Even the most ordinary people avoided approaching us, as if no one of that kind existed here.

It was a gathering of those with abilities and much to lose.

What had Ian Astria done to make everyone tremble with fear?

It was unbelievable.

We momentarily stepped out of the ballroom to catch our breath.

"Rudy… I'm sorry…"

"It's not your fault, Luna."

We had split up and asked around for about an hour but got no answers.

Even Luna was being ignored, as the rumor had spread that we entered together.

"And how come we haven't seen a single blond man?"

"I found one or two… but they looked too young to be your uncle…"

I had been confident we could identify people by their hair color.

But the absence of anyone resembling our description was disconcerting.

"Maybe he didn't come today…"

"That would be the worst-case scenario…"

It dawned on me that there was a possibility my uncle hadn't attended the ball.

"Shouldn't have revealed my name…"

Mentioning my name had been a mistake.

I didn't realize people would shun us to this extent.

As I sighed, Luna patted my back.

"It's not your fault, Rudy! It's the people who run away just because of a name who are to blame!"

Luna placed her hands on her hips and glared towards the ballroom.

"Cowards! Ostracizing Rudy! What did Rudy do to deserve this!"

Luna's scolding brought a smile to my face.

"Right, it's their fault, not mine."

I took a deep breath and looked around.

"Let's continue our search."

The situation wasn't ideal, but what could we do?

We had to do our best in the given circumstances.

"I'll check around the center of the ballroom. Luna, can you cover the second floor?"

"Got it! Then…"

As we were talking, someone approached us.

"You're Rudy Astria, right?"

"…?"

Luna and I turned towards the voice.

It was the bespectacled man who had recognized me earlier.

"Sorry about earlier. I have my own situation, so I couldn't talk to you with everyone watching."

"Ah…"

It seemed he had waited for us to leave the ballroom.

"You're looking for Yurik Astria, right?"

"Yes, yes! That's right!"

Luna nodded vigorously at the man's words.

"But coming here blindly, without any information. Wasn't that a bit reckless? If you knew a little about him, you could have found him easily."

"You're right."

It was an unavoidable situation.

We had come right after hearing Astina's advice and the ball was soon after.

I had no intention of making excuses.

The man, seemingly pleased with my acceptance, smiled and pointed towards the ballroom.

"Go back into the ballroom and look for someone without hair."

“…Bald?"

I widened my eyes in surprise.

"Yes, Yurik Astria is bald. That should make it somewhat easier to find him, right?"

My uncle wasn't blond; he was bald.

I was taken aback by this unexpected revelation.

Luna, equally surprised, opened her mouth and quietly muttered to herself.

"Bald… delinquent…”

"He doesn't look like a delinquent, though."

"Oops…”

Luna quickly covered her mouth with her hands.

"Anyway, with this information, we should be able to find him, right?"

I nodded at the man's words.

"Thank you so much. This is a huge help."

"Well, I must be going now."

The man waved his hand and started walking back towards the ballroom.

"Wait!"

I called out to stop him.

"Sorry to ask, but… what's your name? I'd like to repay you someday."

The man chuckled.

"You're not like the typical Astria family member, are you?"

"Pardon?"

"My name is Wuying."

Wuying?

The sudden mention of such an Eastern name made me tilt my head in confusion.

I had heard of Eastern names, but they were very rare.

While I was still pondering this.

"I should go now. Staying here will only raise suspicions."

The man who introduced himself as Wuying quickly disappeared towards the ballroom.

"Wuying…?"

But how did he know about me?

With a puzzled expression, I watched the man's retreating figure.

CHAPTER 219
ASTRIA (11)

“Hmm…”

Luna looked at my head with a perplexed expression.

“It’s not hereditary.”

“Is that so?”

“My father and grandfather both had thick hair.”

Even though medicine hasn’t advanced much in this world, some medical conjectures are possible.

People here are aware that if a certain disease appears in a family, other members are likely to develop it.

This includes hair loss.

“So, did he shave his head on purpose?”

“Most likely.”

Unless my father and uncle were half-brothers, it couldn’t be attributed to baldness.

“I wonder why he shaved it…”

Shaving one's head doesn’t offer many advantages.

People are visually oriented, naturally drawn to neat and stylish appearances.

Not to say bald people are unattractive, but it’s not typically a favored look.

Being different has its pros and cons; it can attract ridicule, especially in social circles

where a bald person is rare.

The most puzzling part is the rumor that he's sociable.

What kind of person could he be…

"Ah…! Rudy!"

Luna grabbed my sleeve.

"Isn't that him?"

She pointed towards a man with a shining bald head, dressed in a suit, and surrounded by a crowd.

He had a rotund belly, and not a single hair on his head.

Though it's common for middle-aged men to gain weight, his appeared quite excessive.

Yet, I knew he was my uncle.

Despite his weight, his distinct facial features resembled those of the Astria family.

"Be careful, Luna."

"Yes!"

I made my way through the crowd surrounding my uncle.

As I got closer, I could see him clearly.

From afar, his plump and bald appearance made me wonder if he was a corrupt noble.

However, up close, it was clear that my concerns were unfounded.

Despite an appearance that could seem shabby, his eyes were full of life.

Unlike the greedy eyes of corrupt nobles, his were sharp and clear, rare in middle-

aged individuals.

Seeing him laugh heartily, I felt a sense of fondness for him.

“Hello.”

“Ah, hello!”

Luna and I approached my uncle and greeted him.

“Hmm? And who is this young lady…”

“Uncle, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Rudy Astria.”

My uncle’s eyes widened upon hearing my words.

His gaze quickly sharpened.

“Did you come here knowing who I am?”

“Are you not Yurik Astria, my uncle?”

“Yes. That’s correct.”

His response to hearing my name was edged.

“What brings you here? Do you have something specific to discuss?”

“I've come to greet my family. Isn't that reason enough?”

I smiled, but Uncle's expression remained unimpressed.

“I'm hardly your family, am I? Can a member ousted to the collateral branch really be considered part of the main family?”

“Though relegated to the collateral branch, we are still connected by blood, are we not?”

“I don't see it that way. The collateral branch is a separate family from the direct lineage. We've had no interactions, so it's as if we're strangers.”

The surrounding people’s gaze fell on me.

The division of the Astria family into direct and collateral lines was well-known.

The Astria collateral branch is notably less esteemed than other families.

The Astrias have never supported them, and it's common in political circles to disregard the collateral branch.

Given the situation, it was only natural for people to view my visit to Uncle with skepticism.

“Uncle, may we talk privately?”

“It seems our conversation has concluded, hasn't it?”

“I have much left to say.”

“I have nothing. I don't see any value in engaging with you. Besides, conversing with someone at the heart of politics would only tire me out.”

Yurik, renowned in social circles, deliberately stayed out of politics.

He had no noble title and didn't work for the empire.

His life seemed rather aimless.

Such an existence might explain why he had many acquaintances.

Once involved in politics, one invariably makes enemies.

Yesterday's ally could be tomorrow's adversary.

Yurik, having stepped back from politics, was neither friend nor foe, making him approachable.

But his inner thoughts were different.

“Don't you wish for revenge?”

Uncle's eyes widened in surprise.

“Will you continue living this way?”

Not just Uncle, but also those around us, paused at my words.

Yurik Astria.

His story was well-known in political circles. Yurik, not lacking in ability or connections, lost to my father, Perrian.

Betrayed by nobles who had promised to support him, the tides quickly turned against him in the race for succession.

Before his capabilities could be fully assessed, the decision favored Perrian.

Yurik, who had prepared his whole life for this moment, was ousted without proper evaluation.

“What makes you so confident to say such things?”

“We are family, aren't we?”

I smiled.

Every Astria is filled with ambition, and Yurik was no exception.

According to Astina, Yurik Astria was waiting for an opportunity.

It could be a chance to seize power or to take revenge on those who thwarted his ascent.

Whatever it was, I was certain he could be of help to me.

“Won't you consider helping me?”

After the ball ended.

"Rudy… didn't you sound too confident? Maybe you could have been a bit gentler in your approach…"

Luna asked worriedly beside me.

"Perhaps showing confidence is better. It's like inviting someone to cross a narrow bridge; the proposer shaking in fear doesn't really help, does it?"

"Maybe…"

I too was not without concerns.

Uncle's last words.

'Let's end this discussion here.'

It could be interpreted as a rejection.

Luna was probably worried because of that response.

But I hadn't given up hope.

There were many people around us.

Some were close to Uncle, but others could have their own hidden agendas.

So, I thought he was just delaying his answer.

Answering there and then would only serve to pass information to the enemy.

I had done what I needed to do, so all that was left was to return to the family estate and wait for a letter from Uncle.

If Uncle decided to help, things would proceed smoothly.

But even if he chose not to, I just had to do what was necessary.

I couldn't give up everything just because Uncle wouldn't help.

"…But I am still anxious."

"Huh?"

Luna looked puzzled at my muttering.

"It's nothing. More importantly, thank you. For helping me find Uncle."

"Ehehe, it was nothing. You've helped me out much more."

Luna waved her hand dismissively and laughed, but I felt a sense of guilt inside.

I had brought her to the ball, only to have her spend all day looking for someone.

I looked at Luna.

She shone in the winter moonlight, wearing her white dress.

We came all dressed up only to end up searching for people.

I extended my hand to Luna.

"Huh?"

"Aren't you a bit disappointed?"

"Umm… Yeah. It would have been better if we had a more positive outcome."

"Not that. I mean something else."

I caught Luna's hand.

"Aren't you disappointed that we came to the ball and did nothing?"

"Wha, what?"

Luna looked bewildered as I firmly held her hand.

I led her.

"Where are we going?"

"Just follow me."

I moved with Luna towards the garden behind the ballroom.

"Wow…"

There, magical lights blended with the natural moonlight and fireflies, creating a mesmerizing scene.

I chose a spot in the center of the grassy area and let go of Luna's hand, then extended it again with a formal gesture.

"Miss Luna Railer, would you like to dance with me?"

As I spoke, Luna's eyes began to twinkle.

"Dance? Suddenly? No, no. I'm not good at dancing… Besides, here? All of a sudden?"

I just smiled and extended my hand.

Luna, flustered, looked at me, then bit her lip and blushed.

"Please, be gentle."

"What is this, a duel? Of course, I'll be gentle."

Seeing Luna shyly offer her hand made me chuckle.

"But, I really can't dance."

"It's okay. Neither can I."

Though I said that, I had learned a bit since dancing with Astina two years ago.

Not that I could dance at a professional level.

I only knew enough to make do.

I took Luna's hand and placed my other hand on her back.

Luna wrapped her arm around my waist and pressed close.

"Ah…”

Even just getting into position, Luna's face turned red.

I looked at her fondly and stepped forward.

Under the moonlight, we moved our feet in time with the sounds of the night.

We started off decently, but as we went on, our steps began to tangle.

Luna and I were like little children, clumsily stepping around.

"Ahaha…”

"I did say I wasn't very good."

"I know."

We danced with smiles on our faces.

It was an awkward dance, but that didn't matter.

For a moment, we put aside our worries and simply moved to the rhythm, entrusting ourselves to each other.

Deep into the night, when even the crickets had fallen silent, a bright light leaked from one room.

Inside, a blonde girl was present.

Rie Von Ristonia, the First Princess.

She fiddled with her pen while staring at a book.

Though Yuni had renounced her claim to the throne, making Rie the de facto heir, she didn't cease her studies.

Ascending to the throne was just one goal.

She needed to be well-prepared to govern the empire effectively.

Thus, there was no time to relax.

"This is tough…”

Rie furrowed her brow, struggling with her studies.

Knock, knock.

A knocking sound interrupted her, not from the door but the window.

Rie turned towards the sound.

'What could it be at this hour?'

As she spoke, the window opened, and a man entered.

"Greetings to the Empire's Sun."

"Do you have urgent news? You could have waited for the regular report."

Rie looked at the man.

He was in a black outfit, masked, with a serpent and sword emblem representing the Royal secret service.

"I came to discuss a matter with you."

Hearing this, Rie's eyes sharpened, and she adjusted her posture.

"Is it that urgent?"

"No, not urgent."

"Not urgent, but you need to tell me now?"

The man nodded and removed his mask.

"Today at the ball, I met young master Rudy."

The man was Wuying, who had met Rudy earlier that day.

Wuying was a member of the Royal secret service, and furthermore, he was its leader.

"Why was Rudy at the ball?"

"He was there with Lady Luna."

"What?"

"I saw them dancing together in the garden."

"What????"

"The atmosphere was quite pleasant."

At the mention of Rudy, Rie's face, which was ready to bloom into a smile, suddenly turned cold.

"Tell me more."

CHAPTER 220
ASTRIA (12)

Everyone has their Achilles' heel.

It could be a weakness or perhaps a trauma.

For Yurik Astria, it was people.

Yurik couldn’t trust people.

It hadn’t always been that way.

When he was younger…

No, until the competition for succession, he was more trusting of people than anyone else.

He trusted Perrian, his brother competing for the succession, and the nobles around him.

Even when warned that politics was a mire to be wary of, Yurik couldn’t understand.

It didn’t seem to apply to those around him.

Yurik simply focused on honing his skills.

He thought that a capable person could stay out of politics.

He believed he could act in politics as he did within his family.

But it was not so.

It was all an act.

Perrian, who seemed kind and good-natured.

Perrian habitually told Yurik not to behave like other families or predecessors, but to compete fairly on merit.

However, as the time for deciding the successor approached, Perrian completely changed his attitude.

The primary criterion for deciding a successor was the support of the nobility.

One needed the support of the numerous families under the Astria banner.

And when the support was evenly split, other factors would be considered.

Yurik never got to that stage.

The families that had promised to support him all sided with Perrian.

They were nobles who clung to Perrian and only offered sweet words to Yurik.

“There’s no process in competition, only the result remains.”

With those words from Perrian, Yurik was ousted from the family.

He had nowhere to appeal his injustice.

Even the few nobles who had supported him to the end merely pitied Yurik for being deceived.

After being expelled from the family, Yurik immediately shaved his head.

He couldn’t bear to see the hair that connected him to that filthy and vile family.

Thus, Yurik severed his ties with Astria.

“Is Yurik here?”

At that moment, a man entered Yurik's mansion.

“It’s been a while. Count Mayer.”

It was Owen Mayer, Karen’s father and the head of the Mayer family.

“Just call me Owen, like old times.”

The two had been friends since before the Mayer family came under the Astria family.

The Mayer family's entry into the Astria family came after Yurik was expelled.

That decision was made by Owen’s father, the previous Count Mayer.

However, Count Mayer felt a sense of responsibility for being under the family that had ousted his friend Yurik.

Even if it was a necessary decision for the survival of his family, he couldn’t bring himself to face Yurik.

“Has it been 10 years since we last met like this personally?”

Count Mayer said, reminiscing about the past.

“Haven’t we seen each other a few times at balls?”

“That was just passing by and seeing each other’s faces. We never really talked properly.”

Yurik chuckled at Count Mayer’s words.

“So, what brings you here after over 10 years?”

“I just thought of my friend and decided to visit.”

“Is it because of Rudy Astria?”

Yurik’s expression hardened suddenly.

He couldn’t trust people.

Not even a friend he hadn’t seen in a long time.

“It seems so.”

Count Mayer didn’t have a reason to come otherwise.

The Astria family was in a busy period.

A lot of changes happen when a generation changes, and they need to be prepared for it.

His visit at such a time allowed Yurik to make some guesses.

The news of Rudy and Yurik meeting had already spread widely across the Royal capital.

It seemed Count Mayer had heard the news and come.

“Did you come to tell me to reject that guy’s proposal? Did Perrian tell you to do so?”

“No, it’s the opposite.”

“…The opposite?”

“I plan to support Rudy.”

“What?”

Yurik looked at Count Mayer in disbelief.

“You're going to support Rudy Astria, even though Ian is already on a clear path? Are you planning to gamble your family's future?”

“Haha, I am not that bold.”

Count Mayer smiled warmly.

“I believed I had a good eye for people. I thought I could understand someone after seeing and talking to them. But as I grew older and reached this age, I felt my judgment fading.”

When Count Mayer first saw Rudy, he thought him insignificant.

Even when his daughter Karen praised Rudy, he didn’t believe her.

He thought it was just a child's perspective and didn’t take it seriously.

But Rudy was different from the impression he had initially made.

“I have decided to trust my daughter’s judgment. I believe her eyes are more accurate now than mine were when I was younger.”

“…You’re deciding the fate of your family based on that?”

Karen wasn’t the heir of the Mayer family.

The Mayer family had an eldest son who was supposed to inherit the family.

Yet, to think Owen was trusting the words of a daughter unrelated to the family's affairs was absurd to Yurik.

“Father is weak when it comes to his daughter.”

Count Mayer’s laughter was filled with warmth.

Yurik couldn’t understand him.

“It’s a choice that could determine the fate of your family. You’re being swayed by emotion…”

“It’s not just based on my daughter's words. I've also pondered over this decision.”

While Owen was indeed a doting father, he wasn’t so blinded by his daughter's words as to cloud his judgment.

“I said I came here thinking of a friend.”

“…”

“Seeing Rudy now reminds me of you. How you used to chase your goals.”

Yurik, who always did his best even in unfavorable situations and loved people.

It was regrettable to see how broken Yurik had become.

“If you help Rudy, it could be a great help. You could share your network and knowledge of spatial magic.”

“Ha! It’s been decades since I last used it, and now I can’t even use spatial magic. And you think my network, built while I was being betrayed, would be helpful? Do you still believe in people after seeing what happened to me?”

“We don't know that. People might be more ready to help you than you think.”

Count Mayer said this and stood up from his seat.

"The world has more kind-hearted people than you think."

With those words, Count Mayer left the room.

Yurik picked up a bottle of liquor and drank directly from it.

"Damn it…”

"…”

"Hmm…”

I picked up the cutlery in the chilly atmosphere.

"Shall we eat?"

"Eat if you want to."

Sitting in front of me was Rie, giving me a cold stare.

I, clueless about what had happened, just fiddled with the cutlery in front of me.

Gurgle.

A rumbling sound came from my stomach.

At that, Rie let out a deep sigh.

"You can eat if you're hungry. I won't complain about that."

She spoke in her usual warm tone.

"Then…”

I let out a sigh of relief and picked up the cutlery.

"The reason I'm angry is that you didn't make that proposal to me."

"Cough…”

I choked on my food but managed to keep it in my mouth.

"Did you hear about it?"

My actions at the ball had spread quickly across the capital.

My attempt to seek help from my uncle.

But the part that seemed to anger Rie wasn’t the contact with my uncle.

It was more about why I quietly went with Luna.

That I didn't tell her about it.

It seemed like that was what she was implying.

"Do you think I only know rumors?"

Her words pricked my conscience.

Dancing with Luna in the garden late at night.

Could she possibly know about that?

With Rie’s resources, it was entirely possible.

"Haah… What I'm angry about isn’t that you went with Luna."

Rie glared straight at me.

"It's that you tried to hide it."

"I'm sorry."

Rie sighed at my response.

"What am I going to do with our womanizing husband…"

"I'm not a womanizer."

As I defended myself, Rie flinched and looked at me.

Then, she soon broke into a grin.

"Why?"

"You didn't deny being called a husband?"

"I'm not your husband yet."

Rie smiled happily.

"Not yet, huh. You could just call yourself my husband. No need to be shy."

"You should be the one feeling shy."

Rie got up from her seat with a coy smile.

"I'd like to stay longer with my husband, but I'm busy and have to go."

"Why don't you eat something first?"

"No, it's okay. I usually skip breakfast. And I need to get back quickly."

I looked puzzled at her words.

"So, you came here just to say that?"

"Of course. Keeping an eye on the husband is important, especially in the beginning."

"We're not even newlyweds…"

Rie smiled at my words and waved her hand.

"Anyway, don't try to hide anything from me. I know everything."

"Understood…"

Rie then walked towards the door.

Just as she was about to leave through the door, Rie turned her head to look at me.

“Shouldn't a husband give a kiss when his wife leaves for work?”

“…Just go.”

Rie smiled playfully at my response and left through the door.

After Rie had gone.

Just when I was about to have a proper meal.

“Young master Rudy…!”

A maid burst in through the door.

“…Please open the door gently.”

I frowned, feeling like I couldn’t have a proper meal today.

“It’s… A letter has arrived! From Yurik Astria!”

My eyes widened at her words.

CHAPTER 221
ASTRIA (13)

Yurik sat in his mansion, waiting for Rudy.

As he sat in silence, his mind was filled with nothing but doubt.

Rudy was the son of his brother Perrian.

The son of a man who had betrayed him, Rudy could betray him at any moment.

That thought never left his mind.

"Good day to you."

After some time, Rudy arrived at Yurik's mansion.

"Yes."

Yurik responded to Rudy's greeting with a short one of his own.

'He looks quite polished on the outside.'

Rudy's greeting was perfectly respectful.

Yet, Yurik was not pleased.

Anyone can look decent on the outside.

It's easy to hide sinister plans behind a façade.

Yurik gestured towards the front.

"Have a seat."

"Thank you for inviting me."

"There's no need to thank me. I didn't invite you because I'm considering your proposal."

"Still, you gave me the opportunity. I'm grateful for that."

As Rudy smiled broadly at Yurik, Yurik scoffed.

"Let's get to the point."

Without any delay, Yurik continued.

"I can't help you."

His words were firm.

"You must feel it too, looking at this mansion and at me."

Yurik's mansion was extremely shabby.

There was only one maid serving as a housekeeper, and even she was an old woman.

A rundown mansion with no family or servants.

Though related to the Astria family by a distant branch, the mansion was all he had in terms of wealth.

"I don't know what you want, but I've already lost all my power. I have no wealth, and it's been over ten years since I gave up on magic. My body has decayed."

His body, uncared for, had grown fat, and he looked utterly shabby.

He used basic magic to survive in such a place, but it had not improved since the past; rather, it had regressed.

Ever since being ousted from the family, he hadn't read a single book on magic.

Consequently, he had forgotten even what he once knew.

'All I have left are a few people.'

Having been betrayed by his brother, he feared for his life.

So, Yurik built connections to survive.

At least with people around, his brother, the head of the Astria family, wouldn't dare kill him carelessly.

But that didn't mean he trusted those people.

'Even those connections could betray me at any time.'

Without significant abilities or background to keep people close, Yurik now had nothing.

Currently out of politics, he didn't know what would happen if he re-entered and tried to help Rudy.

Those people enjoyed talking with him, not meeting him to become companions in politics.

"So don't waste your time…"

"I don't think so."

"…What?"

"As you said, Uncle, you don't have anything now. But the fact that people are still around you means they trust and follow you. They are people who would follow you even if you return to politics."

At Rudy's words, Yurik let out a wry laugh.

'I see why Owen thought he reminded him of myself.'

It was not a pleasant smile but a bitter, mocking one.

Yurik had once thought like Rudy.

Nobles who supported him when his chances of being the successor were slim.

He firmly believed in them.

And then he was betrayed.

"People trust too easily."

"That trust is the foundation of my strength," Rudy said confidently.

"Let me give you a piece of advice. Trusting people too much will eventually lead to betrayal."

"If that happens, I'll just get back up again."

"But can you really say that after being betrayed by someone you trusted?"

Betrayal by a trusted person hurts more than one might think.

So much so, that it's hard to get back up.

"Even if they take everything you have?"

"My original goal was survival."

Rudy smiled faintly.

"I just thought I needed to survive by any means necessary. Struggling to do so, I gradually gained allies. I received help from them, and I helped them in return. Through that, my thinking changed."

Rudy's priority had always been survival.

Of course, to survive, he needed people around him, so he gathered allies, even if it meant a loss for him.

But now, it was different.

"What's the point of pushing people away with suspicion? What's the meaning of surviving alone after doubting everyone?"

Rudy already knew how to survive.

He had done so in the future and managed to live.

But using that method resulted in everyone's death.

The academy burned down.

That scene was still vivid in his mind.

At that moment, he realized his feelings.

It felt worse than death.

What was the point of having great power and surviving if he lost everything?

It felt like losing everything.

"Even if I am betrayed, I will continue to trust and move forward with the people around me. And for their sake, I will grow stronger."

A life for those around him.

In a way, it was also a life for himself.

I exist because of the people around me.

That's true happiness.

Living for others was ultimately living for oneself.

"From my perspective, I can only advise you not to push away those around you too much, just because they might betray you. As you said, Uncle, the people around you are those who stayed even when you had nothing. It won't change much if you choose a different path."

Yurik stared intently at Rudy.

He seemed like a pure child, yet also like a saint.

"So you're saying you'll trust those around you, even if you're betrayed?"

"Yes."

"What will you do when you're betrayed?"

"I'll think about it when it happens."

"The consequences could be severe."

"I don't want to live in doubt. I have many powerful enemies around me. It's hard enough to understand them, let alone doubting my allies. How can I win like that?"

Yurik let out a hollow laugh.

'He said I was similar to him.'

Not at all.

Rudy was different from his past self.

He liked people, trusted them, but he never thought like this.

It was, in a way, a blind faith.

Just a naive fool who had never even considered betrayal.

But Rudy had a purpose.

For Rudy, the people around him were the goal itself.

Protecting, trusting, and being with his people was Rudy's purpose.

Yet, Yurik didn't completely trust Rudy.

He wasn't sure whether Rudy's words were sincere or just fabricated to get his help.

But still.

"What kind of help do you want from me?"

Yurik's heart had slightly opened.

At least he wanted to observe Rudy's actions to see if his words were genuine.

In the early dawn, as the snow was falling heavily.

Crackle.

The sound of a campfire burning.

Surrounding it were various documents in disarray, and behind them, a large map was spread out.

Aryandor was half-lying on a sofa, fiddling with a dagger.

"Is that guy still lurking around the Astria family's vicinity?"

"It seems he's not moving much now. He hasn't given up, but it's true that he's put things off for now."

In front of him stood Daemon, who had been guarding the necromancers near the Astria family.

"Then I guess it's time for me to return."

"Yes, as long as he doesn't move, I plan to stay here."

"No, there's no time to stay here."

Aryandor stood up.

"Proceed with the plan immediately."

"What do you mean?"

At Daemon's question, Aryandor pointed behind him with the dagger in his hand.

Behind Aryandor, a large map was spread out, with an X marked on one region.

"Astina Persia."

As Aryandor uttered that name, Daemon's expression turned cold.

The one who killed Jefrin.

Daemon wasn't particularly close to Jefrin, but they were comrades.

"Do you plan to attack?"

"Yes."

"The consumption of troops will be significant."

"That's why I called you."

Daemon was a necromancer.

A wizard who could create an army by himself.

It was the reason why the rebels could continue to lead to victory despite having fewer troops compared to the Empire.

Aryandor stood up and thrust the dagger into the map.

The dagger landed on Astina's hometown, the Persia territory.

"You and I will go."

"It won't be easy. Even if the leader himself goes…"

"I know. Troops have moved towards the Persia territory."

"Right. It's a commercial city, so they moved to protect it."

"And possibly to protect the people around Astina Persia."

Whatever the reason, it was true that many soldiers were deployed in the Persia territory.

"There's no need to occupy the Persia territory."

Aryandor pulled the dagger out of the map.

"We're just going to issue a warning."

He smiled and fiddled with the blade of the dagger.

CHAPTER 222
SPATIAL MAGIC (1)

I stared at my hands in the mansion's study.

“…Unable to use spatial magic?"

That was what I had been told after securing Yurik's help.

Yurik, after some contemplation, seemed somewhat convinced.

It made sense that I couldn't have learned spatial magic before attending the academy, and since I hadn't graduated yet, it was only natural that I couldn't use it.

The problem was that there was no way to learn it.

Ian had agreed to teach me, but that was only a nominal promise, a means to comply with the policies set by the empire in the last meeting.

It was as good as not keeping the promise, but I couldn't object.

Legal disputes could prove my point and earn proper treatment, but they took too long.

By the time they concluded, Ian would likely have become the head of the family.

"Then I'll teach you."

"Excuse me?"

"I too know how to use spatial magic. I can't use it now, but I can teach you the basics."

The secret of the Astria family.

Spatial magic related knowledge was a secret unknown to other families, even to the

emperor.

Knowing it was the Astria family's Achilles heel, no one dared to learn about it.

Of course, even if they wanted to, the lack of related materials made it impossible.

"Spatial magic is a spell that anyone who has Astria blood has tried at least once. But once the head of the family is decided, all that ability is taken away."

Hearing this, I realized what my father's transmission meant.

The transmission of spatial magic was essentially a permission.

Permission to allow the use of spatial magic.

As my uncle said, the moment Ian becomes the head, this permission disappears.

And then, Ian would be the only one left who knows how to use spatial magic.

Anyway, I was able to gain basic knowledge of spatial magic from my uncle.

It was an unexpected gain.

But that didn't mean all my problems were solved.

My uncle could only teach me the theoretical aspects, not much practical help.

Now it was my turn to put in the effort.

I had to grow based on that basic knowledge.

“…Let's give it a try."

I started gathering mana in my hands.

'The basics of spatial magic start with recognizing space.'

The words my uncle had said.

I mulled over those words.

"Points and lines… and then space."

Points come together to form a line, and lines come together to form a space.

This was the basic principle of spatial magic.

It was hard to understand what that meant.

But knowing something is different from knowing nothing.

I just had to try.

Even if I failed, by continuously trying, I might gain something.

Thinking of 'points, lines, space,' I moved the mana.

"Point…"

A small light emerged from my hand and floated into the air.

It was mana that would serve as a point.

I created a few more of these points.

I connected the dots in sequence, creating lines, and with 12 lines, I formed a cubic space.

"…"

I looked at the hexagon I had created.

"Is this right?"

Could this be considered a space?

It wasn't spatial magic, just a box made of mana.

It was a box created following the order of points and lines, but it was too ordinary.

I just stared at the box.

The next day.

"Is this how it's done?"

Today was the day Ian would teach me spatial magic.

Unexpectedly, Ian arrived at the mansion early in the morning.

Ian stared intently at the box I had made.

"What's this?"

"The basics of spatial magic."

“…This?"

Ian looked unimpressed.

As if to say, 'Is this what you call spatial magic?'

He made no effort to hide his disdain.

"I created points, lines, and space with mana."

If he's so dissatisfied, he should teach me.

I had made this space trying my best, and this is how he reacts?

Ian nodded after hearing my explanation.

"You understand the basics of space."

"My uncle taught me."

I didn't hide the fact that I had made a deal with my uncle.

Well, to be precise, my uncle and I hadn't fully allied yet.

My uncle decided to watch the situation before joining forces with me.

It was actually better for Ian to think that my uncle and I had decided to fully cooperate.

Putting some pressure on Ian was advantageous for me.

Ian frowned, seemingly uncomfortable with the fact that I was collaborating with my uncle.

"Why don't you learn from your uncle then?"

"It's been a long time since he used spatial magic, so I can't learn properly from him."

"Is that so? But I'm also getting busy and might not be able to come."

"What do you mean by that…?"

"You should understand what I mean by this much."

The rebels had started to move.

That seemed to be what Ian was implying.

"Let's be frank. Teaching you isn't important. Dealing with the rebels takes precedence over you. You would agree with that, right? You don't like them either."

"…Right."

The rebels were a common enemy.

Our fight is between the emperor's faction and the nobility.

Essentially, it's an internal dispute.

"If the rebels have started to move, it's natural that I can't teach you. I might not have come today at all."

If the rebels were on the move, it wasn't a problem if Ian couldn't teach me.

For both me and Ian, as part of the empire, the rebels come first.

"Then why did you come today?"

"To form a temporary alliance."

"Excuse me?"

"I'll teach you a bit about spatial magic now. In return, declare that we won't harm each other while dealing with the rebels. Then I'll also cooperate with you."

Ian is currently the commander of the Royal forces against the rebels.

If the rebels were on the move, Ian would be absent from the Royal capital for a while.

It seemed Ian wanted to prevent me from striking behind his back while he was away.

However, his offer to teach me spatial magic was surprising.

Spatial magic was Ian's greatest weapon.

Was he willing to use it as a condition?

"Aren't you afraid that I might betray you?"

"I prefer not to waste energy unnecessarily. I'd hate to see the empire crumble because of you."

"I wouldn't destroy the empire."

"Your actions could indirectly cause someone else to ruin it."

"The rebels?"

"Do you think my enemies are limited to you and the rebels?"

Ian's words made me laugh.

"Maybe you should try making fewer enemies."

"As someone aiming for the top, it's inevitable to have many enemies. Anyone I've suppressed becomes my enemy."

Ian was indeed my enemy, but I had no intention of destroying the empire.

In a way, he was purely ambitious for the top.

However, I couldn't support his methods.

I stood opposed to Ian's nature of eliminating anyone unnecessary to the empire or obstructive to him.

Yet, for now, it was right to follow his words.

"Fine. Let's form a temporary alliance."

We had a common enemy in Ian's words.

Dealing with the rebels took precedence over confronting Ian.

It would be difficult if Ian took over the family, but other paths existed.

However, if the rebels took over the empire, the situation would be hopeless.

The level of danger was different.

So, it was right to follow Ian's words.

Ian nodded at my response.

"We won't write a contract. We both know such contracts are meaningless."

There were contracts that bound the other party with mana, but they were essentially pointless.

We both had excellent wizards around us who could easily break any contract.

Ultimately, if someone betrayed the other, it meant mutual destruction.

So, we had to rely on each other's conscience.

"You know what will happen if you show any suspicious behavior, right?"

"Don't worry about that. Please take good care of Astina."

The most concerning thing, given the rebels' movement, was naturally Astina.

It seemed likely that the rebels' movement was aimed at targeting Astina.

After all, the most bothersome person to them would be Astina, who had killed the rebel leaders and rallied the Royal army.

I extended my hand to Ian.

Ian, with a displeased expression, shook my hand.

"Behave yourself while I'm gone, focusing on the rebels."

I smiled wryly and responded to Ian's words.

"If you teach me spatial magic well, there shouldn't be any problems."

Ian sighed and extended his hand.

"Alright. I'll teach you the basics of spatial magic."

Ian straightened his clothes as he walked down the corridor of the Royal army's building.

He thought a lot while walking.

He had heard about Rudy contacting his uncle, but he never imagined they would really collaborate.

His uncle was virtually non-existent in Astria.

Ian had thought his uncle could be a problem later, but being a well-known figure in

social circles, it was difficult to deal with him quietly.

Though his uncle hadn't stepped into politics and didn't belong anywhere, Ian became anxious upon learning about his collaboration with Rudy.

After all, his uncle had a wide network and knew how to use spatial magic.

With the rebels starting to move and unusual activities around Rudy, Ian had to make a decision.

Which to deal with first.

He concluded that the rebels were the priority.

That's why Ian proposed a temporary alliance with Rudy, offering spatial magic as a condition.

Initially, he thought of threatening Rudy, but knowing his character, persuasion seemed more effective than threats.

It was a good card to play for persuasion.

The basics of spatial magic.

Once his uncle started teaching, Rudy would grasp the basics of spatial magic anyway.

His uncle, originally knowledgeable in spatial magic, wouldn't find it difficult to teach the basics.

But Rudy wouldn't go beyond the basics.

So, it was better for Ian to teach him the basics himself.

If Rudy was going to learn the basics anyway, it was more beneficial for Ian to teach him and get something else in return.

'Rudy is in check, at least for now.'

Ian reached the door at the end of the corridor.

He opened it.

'Time to eliminate the rebel scum.'

Upon opening the door, several people were inside.

People in uniforms.

Astina and the staff belonging to the Royal army were naturally present, along with other figures.

The owner of the Royal Magic Tower and the representative of the royal wizards, the Royal Chief wizard, Joaquin Lisderon.

Serina's father and the representative of the elementalists, the Head Elementalist, Keln Rinsburg.

The Empire's Chancellor, Jason Ophillius.

There were also the princesses Rie and Yuni.

And even the Emperor himself.

All the heavyweights of the empire were gathered.

Among these formidable figures.

There was one person sitting, pale-faced.

"Why on earth am I here…"

This was Gracie, the youngest professor representing the academy.

CHAPTER 223
SPATIAL MAGIC (2)

“Thank you for coming all this way. Let's get right to the main topic.”

Ian hung a large map on the wall for everyone to see.

“As you all know, the rebels have made their move.”

The location of the rebels was in the south.

Covering a vast granary region in the south, it was situated on the outskirts of the Empire.

“Originally, the southern region was limited by the Verdès territory, preventing further expansion.

However, this time, they have changed their direction.”

The capital of the Empire was located in the center of the Empire's territory.

To attack the capital, one had to break through the Verdès territory.

The Verdès territory, guarded by the prestigious Verdès family, had always been a place of reassurance.

However, the rebels had now shifted their path.

“The rebels are now heading east, towards the Liberion Academy.”

The largest territory in the east of the Empire was actually where the Liberion Academy was located.

Always bustling with students, professors, and other staff, it had developed commercially and was virtually a demilitarized zone, making it a safe haven that attracted many people.

“I've already informed Principal McDowell of the Academy, and the Academy is now in a defensive stance.”

This was the very reason Gracie was here.

People in high positions like Cromwell and McDowell were all preparing to counter the rebels.

So, it was safer to send Gracie, the junior professor, to a secure place.

Although Gracie had shown exceptional performance with Rudy and Yuni as assistants, she was not ready to prepare for war.

The Emperor opened his mouth upon hearing this.

“Could the rebels merely be feigning an attack on the Academy?”

“Your Majesty is correct. We have prepared for the possibility of a large rebel force moving towards any territory. Surrounding territories are all in a state of combat readiness, so they can immediately assist if another territory is attacked.”

Ian then placed pins on the map, indicating these territories.

Rie, who had been watching, raised her hand.

“Princess Rie, please go ahead.”

“Isn't there a possibility that the enemy diverts our attention with a large force and then captures other territories with a smaller one?”

If forces are redirected to counter the rebels on the outskirts, the inner territories become vulnerable.

“Even if they attack from behind, it's essentially meaningless, Princess. By doing so, the rebels, even if they capture a territory, will only end up surrounded by the Empire's forces from both the outer and central regions.”

Even if the rebels capture a territory, it can be quickly retaken, resulting in greater losses for them.

“There’s no need to attack just to capture a territory.”

Rie calmly countered Ian's statement.

“What do you mean by that?”

“The Persia territory.”

The Persia territory was a region located in the southeast.

The rebels were separated from the rest by a mountain range, marking a natural boundary.

Ian frowned.

“Princess Rie, you know we can't move troops in that direction.”

“But that very point could be what they're exploiting.”

Ian, visibly annoyed, ran his hand through his hair.

“Don’t be unreasonable. We’re engaged in war here, not personal feelings. I wish you would not let personal sentiments cloud your judgment.”

It was a well-known fact that Rie had persuaded Astina at the Academy, turning the neutral Persia House into an ally of the Emperor.

Their close relationship was no secret to those present.

However, Rie's considerations were not emotional.

“My thoughts are not driven by personal feelings. As you all know, the Persia territory is a massive warehouse storing grain from the south and a market handling its distribution. Imagine the consequences if it suffers major damage.”

War is not fought by troops alone.

If you have troops, you need food.

Besides, part of the mission is to provide relief to civilians affected by the war.

In the current war, the objective isn't to attack a territory but to defend against attacks.

Damage is inevitable.

Even if we completely defeat the rebels, there will be no spoils of war to gain.

But for Ian, the Royal army's commander, such considerations were unnecessary.

His only goal was victory.

Even if the rebels inflicted damage on the Persia territory, the loss of troops was a certainty.

As long as Persia territory isn't captured, it's more advantageous to inflict troop casualties.

Even if some citizens starve to death, the war itself can still be won.

“So, Princess Rie, are you suggesting we deploy troops near Persia territory, not where the large rebel force is moving?”

Ian's sarcasm was met with a sly smile from Rie.

“The Astria House will provide the means of transportation.”

“…What?”

“Spatial magic. We’ll supply magical artifacts inscribed with spatial magic around the territory, allowing key personnel to be transported directly to Persia territory.”

Spatial magic, a specialty of the Astria House.

Only the head of the house could use this magic, but there was a way to enable others to use it too.

Magical artifacts.

If the head of the Astria House created these artifacts, others could use them too.

“Are you suggesting the Astria House provide these magical artifacts now?”

“Perrian Astria, the current head of the Astria House, isn’t particularly busy with other matters. So, he could create these artifacts for our use.”

“Princess Lia…”

“Hmm…”

Rie's suggestion stirred the room.

Spatial magic artifacts were items the Astria House had never released before.

They weren't nonexistent, but they came with astronomical prices, and even if one could afford them, the House was not inclined to sell.

From the Astria House’s perspective, there was no financial issue necessitating their sale, so there was no reason to offer them.

“We should use a different method.”

Ian sharply interrupted Rie's words.

Rie laughed incredulously at him.

“Didn’t you say it yourself, Commander? This is war. Isn't it biased to let personal feelings influence decisions?”

“There are plenty of ways to win without that method. It's an overinvestment.”

“How can you equate investing in people's lives to a matter of money?”

“Even lives have their value. If there were weapons in the Persia territory capable of defeating the rebels, I’d protect it, but it’s just food. And not even a growing area, but a distribution center.”

“If that distribution is disrupted, not only the people in Persia territory but also those in the north and west could starve to death.”

“That's a concern for later. Right now, winning the war is the priority.”

Ian and Rie's voices grew increasingly louder.

Yet no one around them dared to intervene.

On one side stood a potential leader of the nobility, on the other, a future Emperor.

Getting involved in a clash of titans could be dangerous.

Amidst this silence, someone cautiously raised their hand.

“Um…”

It was Gracie, raising her hand timidly.

The others were shocked to see Gracie, the junior professor of the Academy, attempting to interject in their argument.

“Uh, what if the people from the Academy also help defend the Persia territory…?”

“Professor Gracie?”

“Can the Academy do that?”

Gracie smiled awkwardly.

“Well… the Persia territory and the Academy are connected by a mountain range, so there's actually a fairly accessible path…”

Rie frowned at Gracie's words.

“But even so, if we wait until we hear of an attack, won’t it be too late?”

“Professor Cromwell… No, Vice-Principal Cromwell could move quickly. It might be possible with him…”

Ian nodded with a satisfied smile.

“Vice-Principal Cromwell is trustworthy. Isn’t he also your mentor, Astina?”

Astina nodded, her expression complex.

“Still, we must prepare in advance since we don’t know the extent of the enemy’s forces.”

“Are you saying you don’t trust Cromwell? You were also trained by him, weren’t you? Is such an expert not enough?”

Just as Ian and Rie were about to resume their argument, a man next to them raised his hand.

“Let’s stop here. This seems to be enough.”

A middle-aged man in a neat robe and wearing glasses.

Keln Rinsburg, the head elementalist.

“I understand the concerns of Princess Rie, and I get what Ian is saying. Arguing like this won’t solve anything, so may I make a suggestion?”

Ian nodded.

“Go ahead.”

“I will go to the Persia territory.”

Keln smiled.

"I can move quickly to the territory using elementals. Therefore, I will wait in the Persia territory, and if a battle breaks out in a nearby territory, I will move there."

“Is the Head Elementalist himself going?”

Rie asked, surprised.

The Royal Head Elementalist and the Head wizard were famous for their reluctance to move.

They were figures who seemed almost uninterested in worldly affairs.

They possessed great power but didn’t interfere in politics, only appearing in the academic world, where they focused on research.

“However, I would like to have one person to assist me. As I've aged, I find it difficult to move around on my own.”

Rie smiled and nodded.

“Yes, we will assign a maid from the palace to serve you…”

“No. How could I go to a battlefield with someone who can't defend themselves?”

“…Excuse me?”

“Assign my daughter, Serina Rinsburg, to me. As family, she is most convenient, and being powerful, she will have no problems handling any situation.”

People whispered among themselves at Keln’s words.

“Serina Rinsburg… wasn’t she the one who almost killed the second son of the Astria House?”

“I heard she’s imprisoned…”

The people were unaware that Serina was currently part of the royal secret service.

The names in the secret service were always highly classified.

However, Keln seemed to know exactly where Serina was.

Rie looked at Keln, her expression confused.

“I can't do anything about that…”

That’s when the Emperor spoke up.

“I will permit it.”

“Heh, Your Majesty, don’t forget to reduce her sentence if my daughter contributes to the war effort.”

“I understand. Don’t worry about that; just focus on the war.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Reducing her sentence meant releasing her from the secret service.

While Rie found it beneficial to use a talented individual like Serina in the secret service, she had no say once the Emperor made his decision.

“And.”

The Emperor shifted his gaze to Ian.

“What is the head of the Astria House doing? As you said, the Empire is in a state of war. Why is Perrian Astria cooped up in his house?”

“My father has delegated the duties of the head to me…”

“There must have been a council meeting. You are a contender for the succession, not the confirmed successor. It's acceptable for you to take on some duties of the head, but not all of them.”

The Emperor narrowed his eyes and stood up.

“Inform Perrian Astria to return within three days.”

“…Understood, Your Majesty.”

Ian bowed his head in response.

Even if the Astria House held a high status, it was still a ducal house under the Emperor.

Until now, the Emperor had turned a blind eye to certain matters, but he wouldn’t let this situation slide.

“It seems this is the only matter worth discussing, so let's conclude the meeting. Report the rest in writing.”

“…Understood.”

“Oh, and.”

The Emperor looked towards Gracie, who was standing to the side.

"I heard you're the junior professor, quite a bold one at that. Much better than the nobles who just watched the fight unfold."

"Me? Yes?"

Gracie displayed a bewildered expression at the sudden praise directed at her.

"Thinking that someone like you teaches at the Academy brightens the future of the Empire. I trust you'll do well both in this war and in your future teaching."

"Your Majesty, I am immensely honored!!!"

Gracie bowed her head in surprise.

The Emperor nodded with satisfaction and then headed out of the conference room.

"Well, I shall take my leave now."

"Professor~ You were amazing today~."

"What, amazing?… I don't even know what I said there…"

"Hey, you were really cool when you just raised your hand and said, 'Stop everything!'"

"When did I ever say that?"

"What? You don't remember?"

"I didn't actually say that!"

After the meeting,

Gracie and Yuni were chatting nearby.

"So, will you be staying in the capital for a while?"

"No, I’m going to be moving with the Royal Army…”

"With the Royal Army?"

"Since the Academy is in a dangerous situation, someone from the Academy needs to represent our position to the Royal Army."

"That sounds tough~."

"We have to endure it… Others will have it even harder."

Gracie felt grateful to Cromwell.

The Academy was now entering a state of war, a tremendously dangerous situation.

In the midst of it, Cromwell had extracted the youngest professor, Gracie, to the safest place.

Being a spokesperson for the Royal Army was an incredibly important position from the Academy's perspective.

The spokesperson had to understand the situation on the front and negotiate for appropriate reinforcements based on their position.

Yet, the Academy had sent Gracie there.

This move was to prevent the junior professor Gracie from being exposed to the war.

It was evident that the professors cared for Gracie, despite how hard they made her work.

"Professor."

That’s when Astina called out to Gracie.

"It’s time to leave. You should start packing."

"Ah, okay! Yuni, I'll see you later."

"Take care."

Yuni smiled warmly and waved at Gracie.

After exchanging farewells with Gracie, Yuni turned and walked away.

Hidden from view, Rie was there.

"You could have at least said goodbye"

"Was there any need to do that?"

Rie replied with a blank expression to Yuni's comment.

"Ah! Are you upset because I interrupted you earlier?"

"Absolutely not."

"Seems like you are~."

"I’m not."

Rie narrowed her brows in response and looked in the direction Gracie had left.

However, she wasn’t looking at Gracie.

Her gaze was fixed on Astina, who had called Gracie.

'It should be alright.'

Rie watched Astina’s retreating figure with a complex expression.

CHAPTER 224
SPATIAL MAGIC (3)

At the Astria mansion in the capital.

I sat blankly in the mansion, staring at the ceiling.

'Think of recognizing the points and lines, the space, rather than creating it from scratch.'

Recognizing the space.

What does that even mean?

No matter how much I mulled over Ian's words, they were hard to understand.

According to Ian, the box I created was merely an object formed within the space we inhabit.

It was not space itself but a mere clump of ordinary mana.

Then, what exactly is space?

No, I didn't even need to go that far.

I couldn't even create a single point at present.

Trying to understand space from there was impossible.

I had no choice but to follow Ian's instructions.

Still, the silver lining was that Ian had taught me quite well.

He demonstrated spatial magic directly and explained the theoretical aspects.

His clear explanations made the theory easy to grasp.

But practice was a different story.

'The world is space, and this space is essentially made up of countless points. You need to perceive and feel these points.'

'Spatial magic is not creation. It's a magic that connects existing points in the world, creating lines from these points, and then forming space by connecting these lines. And drawing a boundary between reality and the created space. That's what spatial magic is.'

Although I could understand these words, I couldn't put them into practice.

"What a headache…"

Continuously pondering gave me a literal headache.

How can one perceive what is invisible?

I stared into the void, wondering if I could see the points.

"…I see it. It must be visible. It has to be."

I muttered to myself, glaring into the void.

But that didn't mean they would become visible.

My eyes started to hurt from straining them too much.

"Ugh…"

I rubbed my sore eyes.

Staring into the void wouldn't make them visible…

How can I see the points in space?

Humans have things they can and cannot do with their five senses.

Perceiving space is beyond what can be sensed with the five senses.

Naturally, it was impossible to see with the eyes.

"With the eyes… With the five senses, it's impossible…"

A way for a person to perceive and feel without the five senses.

"…Mana."

I remembered the fight with Jefrin I had before.

An incident where I could sense and understand my surroundings even when all senses were gone.

Reading the flow of mana.

Maybe there's a similarity between reading the flow of mana and perceiving space?

As far as I knew, mana was the only thing that could be perceived without the five senses.

But perceiving mana and space were distinctly different.

Mana is not everywhere.

It needs a center, like a person or a magical tool.

However, points in space exist everywhere.

Perceiving mana was different.

So, do these two concepts follow entirely different paths?

It wasn't like that.

It was still a conjecture, but I considered it a higher level of perception.

Recalling what Ian had explained about perceiving space, it didn't seem much different from perceiving mana.

Then…

"The flow of mana?"

I immediately sought out my uncle.

Pondering alone on such matters was futile.

There were no relevant books available, after all.

Thus, it was better to ask someone knowledgeable.

Studying alone is one thing, but having a teacher makes a world of difference.

Since my uncle had agreed to teach me spatial magic, I had no hesitation in approaching him.

"What I've been contemplating is that perceiving the flow of mana doesn't seem different from perceiving space. It feels like observing something more finely detailed than mana's flow?"

“…Did you come here just to ask that?"

"Yes, haven't you agreed to teach me spatial magic?"

Yurik looked at me incredulously.

"And you came at this hour?"

It was late at night.

Long past sunset, and nearing bedtime.

"I couldn't find an answer on my own. Plus, you're busy during the day, aren't you?"

I initially planned to visit the next morning or during the day, but my uncle was unavailable then.

So, the only feasible time was at night like this.

"May I ask again, then?"

"The relationship between mana's flow and space, is that it?"

"Yes. You know about the flow of mana, don't you?"

"I don't know how to use it, but I understand it theoretically. The flow of mana…"

Yurik pondered, stroking his chin.

Even though he had long given up practicing magic, Yurik was once a notable figure in the magical world.

He may not be up-to-date with modern magical academia, but he certainly knew more basic theoretical knowledge than I did.

After a moment of thought.

"It seems different, yet not."

"…Could you explain that, please?"

"The realms of perception are different. Mana involves perceiving the space we currently inhabit. It's the reality we feel with our sight, touch, and other senses.

But the part you perceive in spatial magic is entirely different."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Let me give you an example."

Yurik paused briefly, then began to explain.

"Imagine there's a piece of paper with invisible grid lines. Our real world is like a graph drawn on these invisible lines, following certain principles and interactions."

Yurik continued his explanation.

"Mana is similar to this. If I were to give an example, it's like an invisible graph. If magic is used, the graph becomes visible, but until then, it can't be seen. We can only

predict how it might be drawn."

"So, is space like the grid lines?"

"Exactly. As I said, space is a realm connected by points and lines. The graphs, which we call reality, can't influence these grid lines. They are merely drawn over them."

I furrowed my brows.

I had somewhat anticipated this.

"So, perceiving mana and space are not entirely different, are they?"

"No, haven't I already said it? The gridlines exist even if invisible, and the graphs, following certain principles, are already drawn in reality."

"What does that mean?"

"To see the gridlines properly, you must face reality squarely. Perceiving the flow of mana is about how the graph will be drawn. Being able to read the flow of mana means you already understand the gridlines of space. You can accurately draw the invisible graph."

It seemed like something I could grasp, yet I was completely lost.

I looked at Yurik with a confused expression.

"Don't overthink it. Feel it as you would the flow of mana. Just think there are already drawn gridlines and look at reality that way."

“…Understood."

Graphs and gridlines…

It was hard to explain, but I began to see the contours of spatial magic.

Reading the flow of mana, creating my own coordinates…

I smiled.

"Thank you for your time this late. I'll be going back now."

"What? Won't you come in for a cup of tea?"

We were at the entrance of the mansion.

Yurik seemed hesitant to let me stand there and tried to invite me inside.

"No, I need to get back quickly."

I couldn't afford to linger here.

I needed to precisely draw the vague outlines of spatial magic I had glimpsed.

"Then, I'll be going."

Thinking of experimenting on my own, I quickly moved away.

"Heh…”

Behind me, Yurik was left with a look of disbelief.

"We shall start the deployment ceremony."

A loud voice rang out.

"Do we really need to go this far?"

"It's essentially for show. The commoners probably don't even know what's happening right now. It's like saying, 'Don't be scared, we have this much military power.'"

Rie and I chatted while watching the ceremony.

Ian, being the commander of the Royal Army, stood at the forefront of the troops, and since my father was in the Astria territory, I had to attend as the representative of Astria.

Thus, I sat right next to Rie, representing the Duke of Astria's family.

"Isn't this just giving information to the rebels?"

"Astina already led some soldiers ahead. The ones deploying now are just the rearguard."

"Is that so?"

As we continued our conversation.

"Heh, you two seem to have a good relationship."

The Emperor, who was behind us, spoke up.

Rie and I were seated right in front of the Emperor's VIP section, so he must have noticed our conversation.

"Ahaha, we haven't seen each other in a while, so we had a lot to catch up on."

I replied with an awkward laugh to the Emperor.

The Emperor looked at me with a pleased smile.

"Yes, when you're used to seeing each other every day at the academy, being apart must leave you with much to talk about."

"Exactly."

The Emperor stroked his chin thoughtfully, then looked at me and smiled.

"You may visit the palace occasionally. I'll permit it, so feel free to come by."

I bowed politely to the Emperor.

"Thank you for the offer, but I'm quite busy and likely won't have much time to visit… I apologize."

"Hmm, feel free to visit whenever…"

"Your Majesty."

As the Emperor was about to continue, Rie spoke up.

"This is an official occasion. Let's refrain from personal conversations."

"Cough."

Chastened by Rie's remark, the Emperor coughed awkwardly.

At moments like this, they seemed less like royalty and more like an ordinary father and daughter.

Rie then turned her gaze from the Emperor to me.

"By the way, how's your progress with spatial magic?"

"So-so. I think I've got a sense of it."

After my conversation with my uncle, I had started to get the hang of it.

I still couldn't use spatial magic, but I could faintly see the gridlines my uncle had mentioned.

"That's good to hear."

Despite saying that, Rie's expression wasn't great.

“…Is something wrong?"

"This worries me…”

The Royal Army responding to the rebels.

The deployment of those soldiers.

There was only one thing she could be referring to.

"Astina?"

"Yes, the rebels are targeting Astina."

I smiled at Rie.

"Don't worry. I've prepared everything."

Rie glared at me.

"That's exactly why I'm worried."

"Huh?"

"I'm afraid you'll do something dangerous on your own."

I was puzzled and tilted my head.

"Weren't you worried about Astina?"

"I am, but knowing your personality, you won't just sit still if you know Astina is in danger."

"…"

"This isn't an academy matter; it's a war, so I can't take direct action."

Rie sighed.

"I won't tell you not to rescue Astina if she's in danger. Just be careful. Think of escaping if you encounter danger."

Her eyes were full of concern as she looked at me.

"Be careful. Don't get hurt."

CHAPTER 225
SPATIAL MAGIC (4)

In front of Liberion Academy, at the Tusen Gorge.

Soldiers and professors were present there.

Since the Academy didn't have a lord, the professors themselves had to defend it in times of war.

However, due to not being a combat group, there was a shortage of soldiers and weaponry.

Still, there wasn't a major problem.

Dozens of professors were at the Academy, each an expert in their field.

Not only were these exceptional individuals guarding it, but the surrounding terrain also protected the Academy.

Numerous gorges and mountain ranges surrounded the area.

Originally, this location was chosen to facilitate outdoor training for the students.

This geographical feature turned the Academy into a natural fortress.

It limited the paths for large armies to move and made it advantageous to fight at the chokepoints.

Even with few soldiers and limited weapons, it was still a safe place.

However, it was also a highly coveted location for the enemy.

For the rebels, capturing such a fortress, even at great sacrifice, could turn the tide of war in their favor.

Thus, the professors were in a state of high alert.

Cromwell approached McDowell, who was overlooking the gorge from above.

“Principal McDowell, I've returned.”

“How are the students and civilians?”

“We've sent most of the students back to their homes, and the residents are safely sheltered inside the Academy.”

The Academy had experienced attacks by rebels before.

Hence, they weren't complacent.

Although the army had to pass through the gorge where the professors were, there could be other methods of attack.

Like the previous rebel attack, where they had used Bone Dragons.

If all professors were stationed in the gorge, they couldn't respond to such an attack.

Therefore, they had evacuated the residents of the village in front of the Academy and stationed some professors there for safety.

“What about the message from the Empire?”

“You mean the instruction to go to Persia's domain in case of emergency?”

“Yes, is it feasible?”

“It's possible, but… are you sure you'll be alright, Principal?”

Principal McDowell had lost an arm to Aryandor.

He couldn't display the same authority as before.

“I'll be fine. The Royal army is already heading this way, isn't it?”

Ian's rear guard was currently moving towards the Academy.

Astina's vanguard was guarding the Verdès domain in the south, while Ian's rear guard was responsible for the Academy area, as per the current Royal strategy.

“Honestly, it's not easy. While moving there is possible, what happens after the move is the problem. If the rebels really come to Persia's domain… Depending on who comes, it might be challenging to perform effectively.”

Cromwell recalled Gracie, who had suggested such a plan.

He wasn't too upset about being overestimated, but considering the war situation, it wasn't a good judgment.

"Still, there's no need for great concern. After all, isn't the Empire's head elementalist also there?”

“…Understood.”

Worrying wouldn't change anything.

It was a decision already made in the meeting, so they had to follow through.

Then, from below, a soldier shouted.

“Principal McDowell! The Royal army is almost here!”

“Understood. Time for us to go and meet them.”

“Yes, let's go.”

Cromwell and McDowell descended to meet the Royal army at the bottom of the gorge.

Verdès Domain, the ramparts.

Astina stood atop them.

From there, she could only see the vast plains, not even an ant in sight.

However, her expression was filled with worry.

“What’s bothering you?”

At that moment, someone approached Astina from behind.

It was Diark Verdès, the only son of the Verdès family.

Astina and Diark weren't originally acquainted, but they had become close surprisingly quickly.

The reason was a shared topic of conversation about Rudy.

Diark, having received help from Rudy during the joint assessment, felt amiable towards Rudy's acquaintances.

He believed in reciprocating the help he received, even if he couldn't repay Rudy directly, he should be kind to those around Rudy.

“How can I not worry when the war is looming so close?”

“Still, thanks to Astina, all preparations are complete, aren’t they?”

“I might have just lit the fuse on a bomb waiting to explode.”

“But…”

“No matter what anyone says, I am the one who hastened this war.”

Diark was about to speak when Astina cut him off.

“However, many people share this responsibility with me. My close ones are involved too.”

Astina was afraid.

She feared that her actions, taken for her own survival, could harm or even kill those around her.

Could she endure it if such a thing happened?

The thought of surviving at the end, atop a pile of bodies, was revolting to her.

And what if Rudy died in such a situation?

Rudy had assured her that he would come to save her.

At the time, it was a joyous thought, but as time passed, she increasingly hoped he wouldn't come.

She sometimes wished to die alone rather than involve others.

"Is there something wrong with Rudy?"

Diark's sudden question made Astina's eyes widen.

"What are you talking about? Rudy is in the capital, isn't he? This place is on the outskirts of the Empire."

"When you talk about Rudy, there's a unique expression on your face."

"What?"

"You wear the same expression when you think of Rudy."

Diark laughed happily and said to Astina.

"…Don't tell others."

"How can I tell others when I don't even know what it's about?"

Astina let out a sigh.

"Rudy is a concern, but not entirely. It was more about the overall worry regarding the war."

"Then, you might not need to worry about Rudy."

Diark spoke with confidence.

"What do you mean?"

“From what I’ve observed, Rudy isn't someone we need to worry about.”

“You mean he’s different from us?”

“No, he's one of us, but a real maverick. He’s so intense that it’s almost like venom oozes out of him.”

Diark continued.

“Rudy lives a different kind of day than we do. He sits in the library all day, then goes to the training ground to practice magic alone, and when he returns to his room, the light never seems to go out.”

Diark had been closely observing Rudy at the Academy.

Initially, it was out of curiosity about how a genius lived.

However, watching Rudy’s life led him to a different conclusion.

Rudy was not a genius.

“There’s a saying that most magic is about talent, isn’t there? That it's a field only for geniuses born into the right families with inherent mana and various other factors. But seeing Rudy, I wonder if I’d be in the same position even with the same elements.

He lives a life that would make one sick just by watching. If that’s what it takes to be a genius, I’d rather not be one. Even if I were asked, I couldn’t do it.”

“How does that translate to not worrying about Rudy?”

“If such a person sets out to do something, would they really fail? Would they fall when faced with danger? Rudy has already been preparing tremendously since his time at the Academy. He’s someone who can overcome anything.”

Rudy didn’t have a natural talent for magic.

If he had, his life might have been different from the start.

He could have easily mastered magic without anyone's help, and when he decided to surpass Evan, he might have even become the top student.

But Rudy didn't do that.

He was just an ordinary person.

However, his efforts were not in vain.

He gained strong abilities and was prepared to overcome any situation.

"So, if we just trust and wait, he'll surely overcome it on his own."

Astina thought of Rudy's face upon hearing Diark's words.

"…Maybe, trusting and waiting is what I should do."

Astina smiled to herself as she looked into the distance.

Then, she turned to Diark.

"Where is the Marquis of Verdès now?"

"My father? He should be inside the castle with his staff."

"Is that so?"

"…? Where are you going?"

"I just remembered somewhere I need to visit."

"A place you need to visit?"

"Persia Domain."

Astina smirked.

"I need to go and see the situation there."

"So, is everything ready now?"

“Yes, it is.”

Daemon responded to Aryandor’s question.

“Tell the soldiers to pull back as there might be a counterattack.”

“Understood.”

Daemon handed a prepared scroll to the bat on his shoulder.

"Then, let's be on our way."

Aryandor laughed.

As he did, a massive movement stirred behind him.

The undead with their enormous bodies.

They began to move.

The location where Aryandor and Daemon stood was in front of the mountain range of Perses' domain.

The Royal army was unaware of one crucial fact.

This mountain range was not a place for ordinary people to traverse.

It was too rugged and twisted, making it impossible to navigate carelessly.

However, Aryandor had cunningly exploited this to his advantage.

In fact, he had been preparing for this for quite some time.

Since people didn't travel through here, it was possible to prepare for war.

An undead army created with necromancy.

Daemon's undead army had been hidden in this mountain range.

The treacherous terrain provided ample hiding places for the undead, allowing for

the concealment of a large force.

"Go."

And now, that undead army began to move.

CHAPTER 226
SPATIAL MAGIC (5)

In the Persia territory.

"How does one even come to a place like this?"

Soldiers were talking atop the city walls.

"How could we possibly understand the thoughts of our superiors?"

"Don't you sometimes think we're better off than those people? It's ridiculous. With mountains like these standing between the rebels and our territory, do they really know nothing?"

"Watch your words. Things visible from a high place are different from those seen below."

"And there are things only visible from below. Speaking as if war is upon us, while keeping us on constant guard."

"At least the pay is generous."

"Generous? That money vanishes after a few drinks."

"That's because you drink too much."

As the soldiers leaned against the wall, chatting leisurely.

Tap tap tap tap.

They heard footsteps approaching.

"Is it the captain? Stand up."

"Yes, yes. Understood."

The grumbling soldier quickly resumed his vigilant stance.

A man approached the soldiers rapidly.

"Loyalty, there's no sign of troubl…”

The man who approached wasn't the captain.

"Sigh…”

It was Keln Rinsburg, the Royal Head Elementalist rumored to have come from the capital.

"Loyalty! To the Head Elementalist…”

But Keln paid no mind to the soldiers.

He ignored the two soldiers and walked past them.

"What…”

Keln looked shocked as he approached the end of the wall.

"Elementalist, sir! It's dangerous at the edge of the wall!"

A soldier, looking alarmed, tried to stop Keln.

"Don't worry about it."

Keln didn't even glance at the soldiers, focusing only on the mountains.

'Something is coming.'

During his stay at the castle, Keln sensed something unusual.

The rustling sound of elementals in the mountains.

As the Royal Head Elementalist, Keln could sense the emotions of elementals not bound to him.

The emotion felt by the mountain elementals was fear.

He didn't know exactly what they feared, but it was a bad sign.

"Sylpherion."

As Keln spoke, the wind gathered, forming the shape of a giant bird.

It was Sylpherion, a high-ranking wind elemental.

"What's happening?"

"Go to that mountain and check what's going on. And Sylph."

A small bird appeared beside Sylpherion.

It was Sylph, a lower-ranking wind elemental.

"Sylph, go to the Persia lord. Inform them of the situation."

"Understood!"

The soldiers looked bewildered at Keln's urgent actions.

"My lord, what is happening?"

As a soldier asked, Keln turned his head.

"War is beginning."

"Professor, have you been well?"

"Well? It's been a continuous struggle."

Cromwell greeted Ian with a calm face.

"I haven't seen you in a long time, Principal. I heard your health wasn't good, are you alright?"

"Haha, I can't just lie in bed because I'm unwell. Please, have a seat."

McDowell extended his hand towards a chair in front with a hearty laugh.

Ian sat down and looked at McDowell.

"Have you heard about the current war situation?"

"Yes, I've read all the materials you sent over."

"Then it'll be easier to discuss. Have all the students of the academy been sent back to their homes?"

McDowell shook his head.

"Not all of them. With the empire in turmoil, students living far away couldn't return. But since it's the vacation period, there aren't many left."

"How many students are still here?"

At Ian's question, Cromwell spoke up.

"About ten or so. The remaining students are being protected along with the residents, so there's no major issue."

"Do you have a list of these students?"

Upon Ian's question, Cromwell handed over a document.

"Some stayed because it's dangerous to return home during the war, and some stayed out of their own will."

As Ian read through the document, he narrowed his eyebrows and pointed to two names.

"What about these kids?"

The two names were Evan and Yeniel.

Next to their names, it was written that they participated in the war.

"These two students volunteered to participate in the war."

"Where are these students now?"

"They move independently. They said they have tasks to attend to."

Ian put down the document and spoke.

"Send them back to the academy or their homes immediately. We can't allow students to participate in the war. Individual movements not even officially sanctioned by the military? That's unacceptable."

"These students have outstanding records at the academy. Yeniel comes from a lineage of rebel assassins, and Evan has been the top student at the academy several times. This decision was made based on their background."

"I am the commander of the Royal Army. I will not permit this."

"Ian Astria."

As Ian's tone heightened, McDowell spoke up.

"Is it because of the responsibility? Then let me take responsibility."

The responsibility that comes when students are injured or killed was more serious than imagined.

Even though Evan and Yeniel were not from prominent families, any harm to academy students would cause a significant reaction from the empire.

It would not only be awkward for the academy, but also leave a major scar on Ian's achievements as the commander of the Royal Army.

If the commander of the Royal Army, who came to protect the academy, allowed students to get hurt by the rebels, he would undoubtedly bear the responsibility.

That's why Ian was vehemently opposed.

"And do you think they won't participate just because we oppose it? They're stubborn, so it's safer to keep them where we can manage."

Ian looked intently at McDowell as he spoke, then nodded in agreement.

"If the Principal insists, I will comply. However, I will not assume any responsibility."

"Do as you see fit."

McDowell said this and then glanced at the ceiling with a slight smile.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Let's continue discussing the war."

They continued their meeting.

Having both faced the rebels directly, they could provide Ian with detailed explanations.

In their discussion, a critical issue arose: Aryandor's time magic.

This was the biggest headache.

If the enemy could attack and then reverse time, they could continue the war indefinitely.

Worse, they could do so while erasing their own memories, leaving only the rebels with knowledge of their tactics.

"Does that mean time could already have been reversed?"

"Possibly. We can only hope it hasn't."

The magical device Luna obtained during the last rebel attack was analyzed, revealing it could erase everyone's memories.

The device, combining Jefrin's illusion magic and Aryandor's time magic, could manipulate both memory and time.

Though Jefrin was dead and no more such devices could be created, the number remaining was unknown.

So, it was possible they were already in a reversed timeline.

A situation where all Royal Army members lost their memories, and time was reversed.

This was the worst-case scenario for the Royal Army.

"Our first priority should be to unravel Aryandor's time magic. We need to determine whether we're in a reversed timeline."

Ian stroked his chin thoughtfully at McDowell's words.

Time and space were somewhat similar realms of magic.

However, without having faced Aryandor directly, Ian couldn't know the specifics.

"If I encounter Aryandor, I'll take him on. Perhaps I can find the answers there."

"Understood. Let's plan for that."

Just as they were about to move to the next topic…

"Commander!!!"

"What's the matter?"

Ian's aide burst into the tent where they were meeting.

"We've received a request for assistance from the Persia territory!!"

"Rebels? How could the rebels…"

"I'm not sure of the details. It's not an attack yet, but the Head Elementalist urged us to send word quickly."

"How large is the force?"

"It seems to be a significant force. What will you do?"

Ian made a swift decision.

"Proceed as planned. Professor Cromwell will go first, followed by the troops. Also, check the movement of the academy's forces."

"Understood."

Ian heard his aide's response and then looked at Cromwell.

"Professor, I'm counting on you."

Cromwell clenched his teeth at this.

The situation seemed to involve a large enemy force.

Flying from the academy to the Persia territory to face such a force?

They might manage to handle the lesser foes, but facing Aryandor or other leaders was out of the question.

Then, McDowell spoke up.

"Ian, can't you transport someone using spatial magic?"

He was asking whether Ian could move others using spatial magic, an idea inspired by the time when future Rudy used it to transport Rie and Yuni.

"There are limits to spatial magic. I lack the skill to transport others as of yet."

"I see…"

Cromwell sighed upon hearing this.

"Then I shall leave immediately."

"I'll assess the situation and follow promptly."

As a user of spatial magic, Ian could transport himself there directly.

However, if the enemy deployed a pincer attack, their current location might be jeopardized.

Even Ian couldn't continuously use spatial magic, especially over distances like between the Persia territory and the academy.

Therefore, they needed to gauge the rebels' movements before deciding whether to assist the Persia territory.

"Gravity."

Cromwell used magic to levitate and started moving towards the Persia territory.

McDowell watched him ascend.

"Be careful out there."

"Understood."

Cromwell promptly headed towards the Persia territory.

"Then."

Ian stood up and looked at his aide.

"Let's get moving."

Cromwell clenched his teeth as he flew through the air.

He regulated his mana usage, flying as fast as he could.

It sounded contradictory, but he was trying to maintain a balance.

Soon, he reached the vicinity of a mountain range.

'If I follow the mountain range… '

The Persia territory lay somewhere in between.

"Hmm?"

Just as he was about to follow the mountain range, he spotted a huge object in the distance.

A giant creature covered in red scales.

“…A dragon?"

It was a Red Dragon, sitting squarely on the path along the mountain range.

Cromwell's eyes widened at the sudden appearance of the Red Dragon.

And a flurry of thoughts crossed his mind.

Was this dragon prepared by the rebels?

Or was it just a coincidence?

He couldn't afford to fight this dragon now.

He needed to reach the Persia territory as soon as possible.

Cromwell tried to pass by quietly.

"Professor."

"…?"

Someone called out from the direction of the dragon.

"Professor. Over here."

A man stood atop the giant dragon's head.

A man with black hair, wielding a sword.

It was Evan.

CHAPTER 227
SPATIAL MAGIC (6)

"Professor, I've been waiting for you."

Evan greeted Cromwell with a smile.

"You are… no, that dragon is…"

It was the Hatchling they had seen during the joint assessment.

"Get on for now. We don't have time to delay."

"Grrr."

As Evan gestured, the Red Dragon made a sound of displeasure.

Thump!

Evan slapped the dragon's head with his palm.

"Hey, this professor is stronger than you."

"…Anyway!!! I am not something to be ridden!!!"

"Got it. Just this once, please."

"Grrrr…"

The Red Dragon grumbled, but offered its back to Cromwell.

"Huh…"

"Let's go now."

As Cromwell mounted, the dragon spread its wings.

"Hold on tight. I won't notice if you fall off."

"Alright."

Rudy had mentioned taming the dragon, but Cromwell hadn't expected it to become this docile.

Of course, it might be due to magical constraints, but looking at Evan and the dragon, they seemed to get along reasonably well.

"This dragon… no, why are you here?"

"I said I would join the war. So, I came to assist you."

"No…"

Cromwell furrowed his brows, feeling frustrated.

There were more than a couple of oddities.

"Rudy Astria asked me to assist in the war."

"…What?"

Cromwell's eyebrows knitted together at the sudden mention of Rudy Astria.

"He asked me to help the Persia region. And to bring along Yongyong."

"…Yongyong?"

"That's this guy's name."

Evan chuckled and patted the dragon's body.

"Don't call me by such a name!!!!!!!"

The dragon roared, but Evan paid it no mind.

"Besides, how did you know I would be coming here?"

"Yeniel was nearby and contacted me."

“…She was undercover?"

"According to Yeniel, Principal McDowell didn’t say anything…”

Cromwell, preoccupied with many concerns, hadn't noticed Yeniel's presence.

However, McDowell had sensed it and, pretending not to notice, allowed Yeniel to listen in on the war situation.

McDowell believed in the potential of the students.

Variables that could change the unfavorable situation created by Aryandor's time magic.

It might be shameful as an adult, but he entrusted this to the students.

And McDowell was doing what he must as an adult.

Thus, Cromwell and Evan headed towards the Persia region.

Astina headed towards the Persia region.

As the deputy commander, she had planned to stay in the Verdès region, but staying there was meaningless.

Most of the rebels were in front of the academy, and it would take a long time for that force to move to the Verdès region.

Even if there was a surprise attack, Astina could quickly regroup her troops, so there was no major issue.

Thus, Astina transferred command to the head of the Verdès family and went to the Persia region.

Astina headed for the Verdès region for a reason.

It was to confront her fate head-on.

Herself facing death in the Persia region.

Originally, she had tried to avoid that future.

She had tried to flee from that future.

To avoid that outcome, she just needed to be absent from that place.

But could she overcome fate like that?

Could she witness a good outcome?

It was questionable.

Was it enough just to survive?

Was it enough just to barely cling to life and remain in this world?

The answer was clear.

Merely surviving held no meaning.

Should she survive alone, only for her family's domain to fall into ruins?

In Astina's heart, her domain was etched deeply.

Those who moved vigorously from dawn, transporting goods throughout the empire.

She couldn't ignore them.

"Astina, it's because of these people that the empire thrives," her father had said.

Those who were diligently fulfilling their roles.

Creating a space for them had been her father's goal.

Thus, her father built the empire's largest commercial city.

And now, it was Astina’s turn to carry on that goal.

To protect them all.

Astina had struggled to see good results.

She fought against her destiny and resisted oppression.

Thus, she rose to a position that no one could ignore.

But if she ran away now.

If she fled to survive.

It would be like denying her own life.

In truth, knowing the future changed nothing.

There was nothing to worry about.

Hadn't she lived the same way until now?

Facing the tempest of fate head-on, overcoming it with her own strength.

That was Astina's life.

As Astina neared the Persia region.

Thud.

Boom.

Ominous sounds came from the mountain range.

The sound of giant footsteps and trees being crushed.

Then, the culprits of these sounds revealed themselves.

Golems entangled with giant skeletons and corpses.

Underneath them were zombies and skeletons.

An army created by necromancy.

The vast army, too large to see its end, headed towards the Persia region.

A situation where any ordinary person would flee.

Yet, Astina smiled.

As she had anticipated, the rebels were targeting the Persia region.

'Just do as I always have.'

As always.

Overcome and move forward.

"Gravity."

Astina used magic and soared into the sky.

Philip, the head of the Persia family and Astina's father, donned his armor and ascended the castle walls.

"What is this……”

Philip had never experienced war.

He had been managing the domain, but Philip had left the combat aspect to the surrounding families.

Being proficient in administrative tasks and less knowledgeable in combat, it was a wise decision for Philip.

However, it was time for Philip to step forward.

As the lord, staying cooped up in his manor during war would surely demoralize the

soldiers.

That's why Philip was on the ramparts.

"Lord, please stay calm. The soldiers are watching."

Thankfully, Keln, the Head Elementalist, was by his side.

"Lord, you must protect yourself at all costs. Your presence alone will continue to boost the soldiers' morale."

“…Understood."

"I will leave my daughter near you, so you won’t be in danger."

Keln introduced his daughter, Serina, to Philip.

"I am Serina Rinsburg."

"Please, take care."

Yet, Philip couldn't remain calm.

The overwhelming force of the undead legion descending from the mountains was intimidating.

Seeing monsters whose heads reached the ends of the walls and grotesque skeletons swarming, he felt nauseous.

His face turned pale with worry about the war.

"But… can we win?"

Their numbers were too many.

He had expected some attack, but not an army of this magnitude.

"We'll have to see. In war, 100 soldiers can beat 1000 at times."

"But, then…”

"However, Professor Cromwell is on his way, and the Royal army has promised to come to our aid. We just need to hold out until then."

Normally, victory in war meant overpowering the enemy with strong force, but now, they just needed to hold out.

Fitting for the empire's granary, the fortress had ample food supplies, making it ideal for a siege.

'But, we must not be complacent.'

In fact, the legion created by necromancy could be dealt with easily.

It was the creatures lurking behind that were frightening.

What kind of beings with what abilities might emerge from within the legion.

That was the biggest variable.

However, Keln did not share these thoughts with Philip.

There was no need to induce fear in someone already trembling.

After all, Keln himself had to lead the battle.

It was time for the Head Elementalist, experienced in many battles, to show his dignity.

"Sylpherion."

As Keln spoke, a giant bird appeared above his head.

Large enough to cover the fortress.

Comparable in size to a dragon.

From Sylpherion’s body, a blue wind spread out.

"Ah…”

"Is that… a high-level elemental?"

The soldiers gaped at the sight.

A high-level elemental they might never see in their lifetime.

The sight of such a elemental wrapping the fortress in blue wind was awe-inspiring.

"So…"

Keln looked at the approaching undead legion, ready to signal the start of the war.

"…Hmm?"

But he was suddenly struck dumb by the appearance of someone unexpected.

"Why… are you here?"

The person who appeared before him was Astina, the deputy commander of the Royal army.

Astina, having used magic to lift herself, appeared in front of the castle.

"Ah, Astina!"

Philip exclaimed her name upon seeing her.

Astina turned her head slightly upon hearing Philip's words.

"Father, I'm here."

Then she smiled.

"I will protect our domain."

Astina manipulated her mana.

Koogung…

The ground itself seemed to rumble.

Astina's mana was moving the very earth.

"Kruck…?"

"Grrr."

The undead legion too felt the strangeness and began to hesitate in their movements.

Astina shouted towards the undead legion.

"There is no place here for filthy beings who refuse death."

With those words, the vibrations grew stronger.

"This land belongs to those who are living in the present, the busiest people of the empire."

The stones on the ground began to stir.

"So, I will send you creatures back to where you originally belonged."

Astina extended her hand.

"Gravity."

CHAPTER 228
SPATIAL MAGIC (7)

The ground split apart.

Just like when she fought with Jefrin, Astina overturned all the land around her.

The undead were hit by Astina's magic, unable to respond.

They fell into the fissures and were buried under the overturned earth.

Astina sent them back to the earth where they originally belonged.

The soldiers and Keln Rinsburg, atop the fortress, stared blankly at this spectacle.

They knew Astina was skilled in magic, but they hadn't expected this extent.

A girl, who had just come of age, was dominating the battlefield.

Someone frowned upon witnessing this scene.

"Why is that person here?"

From a mountain, Aryandor narrowed his eyes as he looked down at the battlefield.

Aryandor had thought his side would lead at the beginning of the battle.

It was a natural assumption, given they had initiated a surprise attack.

Daemon bowed his head to Aryandor.

"I apologize. I failed to assess the situation correctly."

Aryandor, hearing Daemon's apology, scanned the battlefield.

"Still, it doesn't seem to be a major variable."

There was no one on the battlefield who could be considered a variable except for Astina.

Perhaps reinforcements would arrive, but that was within Aryandor's expectations.

"It's better for that person to come than others."

Aryandor's strategy was to demonstrate that the Empire couldn't protect Astina.

Unable to target Astina, the Vice Commander directly, they aimed for her territory, the Persia Estate.

However, Astina's direct presence in her estate wasn't entirely bad for Aryandor.

"Are the others moving as planned?"

"Yes, the main force is proceeding as ordered."

Daemon pointed at a bat, with flesh torn in several places, and said,

The main force of the rebels seemed ready to invade at any moment.

However, they had no intention of attacking.

They were merely feigning an attack to prevent reinforcements from reaching Persia.

"Let's change our strategy slightly."

"How would you like to change it?"

Aryandor drew his sword.

"I will go to the battlefield myself."

"Astina…"

Philip, the head of the Persia family, gaped at Astina.

He knew his daughter was achieving good results with her magic, but he hadn't expected such power.

His small, delicate daughter was no longer there.

Only an incredible wizard, dominating the battlefield with her dignity, remained.

"You have raised your daughter well."

Keln couldn't hide his admiration.

Surprised and proud, Philip responded,

"Yes, she has grown so much without me realizing."

"This war seems to be turning in our favor, thanks to her."

Keln smiled and extended his hand.

"Everyone, continue the attack! Don't miss the opportunity created by Astina!"

Keln commanded the elementals as he shouted.

The soldiers responded to Keln's call.

They shot arrows and rolled stones.

Astina's setup on the battlefield was bolstered by added force.

Most of the undead fell to Astina's magic, and those who broke through her spells were taken down by the soldiers.

"We can win this…!"

"Trust in Lady Astina!"

As the battle visibly tipped in their favor, the soldiers' morale soared.

However, victory was not yet assured.

From the forest, a massive being emerged.

Astina gazed at this entity.

'Sooner than I expected.'

A Bone Dragon.

With its huge, bony body, it entered the battlefield.

But Astina's thoughts were not on the Bone Dragon.

It was the figure standing on its head.

It was Aryandor.

Aryandor rode the Bone Dragon towards Astina.

"Is this our first face-to-face encounter?"

"I wish I never had to see the face of someone like you."

Aryandor's lips curled up at Astina's words.

"Those from the academy are all cheeky."

"Well, it's because of who you are. Educated people have a keen eye for worthlessness."

Astina mocked Aryandor.

Her provocation aimed to keep him from heading elsewhere.

If he went towards the fortress instead of her, it would lead to tremendous sacrifice, so it was better to draw his attention to herself.

"You're more talkative than I heard. Or is this a provocation?"

Aryandor saw through Astina's actions.

Provocation was not her strong suit, revealing an awkwardness in her behavior.

However, even reading this, he did not attack elsewhere.

"Don't worry. You are my target."

With that, Aryandor smiled and touched the head of the Bone Dragon.

"But, if my attack misses and others die, it can't be helped."

As Aryandor spoke, the Bone Dragon inhaled.

The act of opening its mouth and inhaling.

A technique known as a dragon's secret skill.

'Breath.'

Astina recognized it instantly.

Though she had never faced a dragon, she possessed common knowledge about them.

'Do I dodge?'

No, she couldn't.

As Aryandor said, a blind attack would strike the soldiers in the fortress.

She had no choice.

"Then I'll block it…"

"Astina Persia."

Keln called out Astina's name.

"Step back."

As Astina turned around, she saw Keln on a giant bird.

"I'll handle this."

Simultaneously, a green-colored breath emerged from the Bone Dragon's mouth.

Each dragon's breath had a different form.

The Bone Dragon's breath was a poison that melted everything.

"Sylpherion."

Keln didn't need to command; Sylpherion acted on its own.

The green breath, covering the battlefield, approached.

To block the breath, Sylpherion wrapped the battlefield in wind.

A huge spherical barrier formed, and the breath enveloped this barrier.

"Sigh…"

However, the attack was not over yet.

Aryandor raised his sword and charged towards the barrier.

It was as if he was slicing through the shield that blocked the breath.

"Anti Gravity."

Astina cast her magic.

Anti-gravity.

Aryandor's body, flying towards the shield, was repelled into the air.

Aryandor, floating in mid-air, curled his lips and raised his left hand, the one not holding the sword.

"Time Back."

He used time magic.

Aryandor's body, previously floating, vanished in an instant.

"Huh?"

He reappeared at the same spot where he had been slicing the shield before.

Time regression.

He had used time magic to change his position.

As Astina was caught off guard, Aryandor adopted a horizontal slashing stance.

"Northern Swordsmanship."

A blue flame, symbolizing the North, enveloped Aryandor's sword.

"Blue Flame."

Aryandor swung his sword horizontally.

The blue flame on his sword flew towards the shield, covering it along with the breath.

"What…"

Keln was shocked to see the sword energy.

The Northern Swordsmanship was a technique passed down through the Lucarion family.

It was impossible for Aryandor to know it.

But the current situation was more pressing.

"The Northern sword energy is blue, but it burns everything, even wind."

As soon as Aryandor spoke, fire began consuming the wind.

The shield was eroded by fire, creating a hole, through which the Bone Dragon's breath leaked.

"I'll block it."

Astina quickly manipulated her mana.

"Anti Gravity Shield."

She created an anti-gravity field near the breached shield.

Before the breath's energy dissipated, she judged it more efficient to push it away.

Astina's magic repelled the breath and blue flames covering the shield into the air.

Aryandor, back on the Bone Dragon, looked at Keln and Astina struggling to block the attacks and laughed.

"Aren't you struggling too much from the start?"

Astina stared at Aryandor.

She knew he was a magic swordsman, but was taken aback to see him using Northern Swordsmanship.

How was he able to use that technique?

Yet, her surprise didn't stop there.

Aryandor raised his sword again.

"Royal Swordsmanship."

This time, a golden wave enveloped his sword.

It was a technique passed down among Royal knights.

The sword energy he wielded was indistinguishable in its finesse.

"What…"

Following the Northern Swordsmanship, now the Royal Swordsmanship.

Ordinary swordsmen learn one swordsmanship and refine it until death.

While it's not unheard of for swordsmen to learn multiple techniques, Aryandor was in a different league.

The techniques he used were not easily learned, and there were few who could teach them.

The Northern Swordsmanship, for instance, was known only to the Lucarion family, the guardians of the North, and the Royal Swordsmanship was a technique passed down to the top knight of the Empire.

Astina was incredulous at Aryandor's ease with such swordsmanship.

'This isn't the time to worry about that.'

She shook her head and moved her mana again.

She had to block the attack.

The problem was that she didn't know which technique he would use next.

Even with a single swordsmanship style, there are multiple techniques.

But with multiple swordsmanship styles in play, devising a counter-strategy was impossible.

Seeing Astina's confusion, Keln quickly spoke.

"Block it as before. Think of the next move."

They didn't know whether the enemy would target their rear or themselves.

The only option was to block the whole area.

Astina looked down.

The soldiers were beginning to falter as Keln and Astina were distracted.

If they lost focus, victory was far from reach, let alone holding their ground.

But…

"I understand."

She couldn't come up with a counter-strategy.

At the academy, besides Locke and Yeniel, she had never faced anyone with outstanding swordsmanship.

She had no choice but to rely on Keln, who was more experienced.

"Sylpherion."

As Keln was about to create another shield,

Aryandor attempted to strike down with his sword.

"Imperi…"

However, his sword did not descend.

Aryandor, holding his sword, suddenly stopped mid-strike and shifted his gaze.

He then scoffed.

"They're coming too quickly."

With that, Aryandor kicked off the Bone Dragon and leaped into the air.

"Huh?"

Astina's eyes widened at Aryandor's sudden action.

Then, a voice reached her ears.

"Bite."

Along with the voice, a tremendous wind swept by her side.

A massive dragon covered in red scales.

This dragon swept past Astina and lunged at the Bone Dragon.

"…?"

The suddenly appearing Red Dragon bit the neck of the Bone Dragon and forced it to the ground.

Thud!!!!

Though smaller in size than the Bone Dragon, the Red Dragon's velocity enabled it to pin its opponent to the ground.

"Dragons…?"

Dragons were creatures hostile to humans.

While the Bone Dragon, being a product of necromancy, obeyed human commands, other dragons did not.

Dragons, who would typically scoff at humans fighting each other, had joined the fray.

While Astina's thoughts were racing,

"Gravity."

A voice came from the sky.

It was Cromwell, the mentor who had taught her psychokinesis.

CHAPTER 229
SPATIAL MAGIC (8)

“Gravity.”

Cromwell used his magic as soon as he appeared.

His target was Aryandor.

As Aryandor leaped off the bone dragon and landed on the ground, the earth beneath his feet collapsed.

However, Aryandor didn't just succumb to the attack.

He began dodging Cromwell’s strikes with dazzling movements.

He kicked off the upheaving earth to leap into the air, slicing through the incoming boulders with his sword.

Without using time magic, he evaded the attacks solely with his physical prowess.

“You old man, I thought you’d be panting by now, but you're brimming with energy.”

At Aryandor's taunt, Cromwell laughed.

“Even if I lose all my hair, I can still handle someone like you.”

Though he said so, the reason Cromwell could freely use magic was simple.

He had arrived here riding a dragon, which made this possible.

Had he flown here using magic, he wouldn't have been able to utilize his power effectively.

“But, I don’t intend to fight you. I have a different opponent in mind.”

Aryandor said this, looking up at Astina hovering in the air.

“So, I’ll find you another opponent.”

Suddenly, a giant fist flew towards Cromwell.

“Barrier.”

Despite the sudden appearance of the fist, Cromwell easily deflected it with his magic.

“Hmm?”

Cromwell looked in the direction from which the fist had come.

There stood a man with a drowsy expression, the giant hand behind him having aimed at Cromwell.

“A necromancer, huh.”

A familiar face.

It was Daemon, a user of necromancy.

“Gravity.”

Recognizing his opponent, Cromwell immediately cast his magic.

The ground around them shifted, enveloping his adversary.

‘…He doesn’t dodge?’

Daemon stood still as the earth swallowed him, and Cromwell looked on in disbelief.

However, Cromwell didn't let his guard down.

It seemed unlikely that a leader of the rebels would be defeated so easily.

As Cromwell anticipated, more fists flew towards him.

But this time, there were several.

Several fists, each as big as a giant’s, targeted Cromwell.

“Gravity Shield.”

Cromwell quickly cast a spell, shielding himself from all directions.

The fists were blocked by the barrier and couldn't reach Cromwell.

What was strange was that the barrier didn’t seem to take much damage.

‘…An illusion?’

Visible to the eye, but lacking substance.

This sensation was that of an illusion.

And if it was this type of illusion…

‘Jefrin.’

It was similar to the illusion magic used by Jefrin.

He made the opponent aware from the beginning that they were facing an illusion.

Illusion magic shines brightest when the opponent is unaware it's an illusion, but Jefrin’s approach was different.

She intertwined multiple illusions to blur the line between illusion and reality.

By making the opponent aware of the illusion, she induced a more defensive stance in them.

However, Jefrin was dead.

Now, despite Jefrin's absence, her influence was still perceptible.

"Who is using this magic?"

It was implausible to think that Daemon was the one using it.

A wizard who had honed necromancy to the extent of enveloping a fortress couldn't be expected to also know Jefrin-style illusion magic.

Moreover, using both illusion and necromancy simultaneously would consume a significant amount of mana, making it unsustainable for long.

Even if he knew how to use it, it would be like a path to self-destruction.

“Ahaha~.”

Then, Cromwell heard laughter.

It was the echo of a girl's laughter, sounding like Jefrin's voice.

And then, appearing before Cromwell, was the figure of a girl.

She was wearing a pointy hat fit for a witch - it was Jefrin.

However, she was not in her usual state.

Her face was ravaged, her clothes torn, looking almost as if she was on the brink of death.

There were clear marks of a noose around her neck.

“Necromancy, huh.”

The undead created by necromancy have abilities dependent on the corpse used.

If a skilled swordsman is turned into an undead, they can utilize the techniques they used in life, and the same goes for wizards.

An undead created from the corpse of a wizard can use the magic that the wizard used while alive.

"Those Royal fools. If they knew there was a necromancer, they should have taken better care of the bodies."

Cromwell clicked his tongue, quickly assessing the situation.

Even if Jefrin's body was revived with necromancy, it couldn't possibly utilize all her original abilities.

He had to exploit this weakness.

'Finish this quickly… and protect my disciple.'

As long as Daemon was targeting him, Cromwell couldn't ignore it and just pass by.

He glanced at Astina, who was confronting Aryandor.

'Just hold on a little longer.'

Then, he began to manipulate his mana.

"Gravity."

"It seems there's no one left to protect you now."

Cromwell was dealing with Daemon, and the dragons and Sylpherion were holding off the bone dragon.

Aryandor and Astina faced each other head-on, without anyone else's interference.

"Now, I will kill you. Tear your body to shreds and sprinkle your blood over Jefrin's grave. So that Jefrin can rest in peace."

Astina sneered at Aryandor's words.

"Raise a body and then let them rest in peace?"

Far off, Cromwell was seen confronting Jefrin.

Having witnessed Jefrin's death up close, Astina immediately realized that it was Jefrin resurrected by necromancy.

The idea that those who raise the dead would fulfill their vengeance was absurd to her.

“That's nothing but a corpse. Jefrin would also want her body to be used efficiently.”

Astina stared intently at Aryandor.

“Such a contradictory bunch.”

Crying for peace while waging war.

Raising the dead, yet wishing for the deceased to rest in peace.

It was all a chaotic mess.

“I guess I need to correct that way of thinking.”

Aryandor burst into laughter.

"Presumptuous, aren't you?"

Aryandor immediately drew his sword.

"You can never win against me."

Astina's lips curled up in response to Aryandor's words.

In a normal situation, Aryandor might have been right, but Astina had her own strategy.

She manipulated her mana, which was immensely powerful.

Yet, nothing happened.

Seeing this, Aryandor tilted his head in confusion.

"Got some tricks up your sleeve, I see."

He chuckled softly, gathering sword energy.

“No matter your strategy, you can't win. The power difference between us is overwhelming.”

"Don’t you think overcoming that power difference is what strategy is all about?"

Aryandor didn't react to Astina's sarcasm and continued to gather sword energy.

Golden sword energy swirled around his blade, rippling like waves.

The golden energy he had displayed earlier was not an illusion.

It was the golden sword energy used in Royal swordsmanship, clearly visible now.

But that didn't change what she had to do.

“Royal swordsmanship.”

‘Here it comes.’

Astina moved her mana.

“Golden Sword, Dragon Star Fall.”

The golden wave converged on his sword at once.

The ordinary silver-colored blade turned golden.

Simultaneously, Aryandor raised his sword high.

And then he struck down.

The gathered golden light radiated in the direction of his strike.

It resembled a giant golden light falling to the ground.

A wave of golden light spread around them.

‘He’s targeting only me.’

The attack fell towards the ground where Astina stood.

If it only targeted Astina, who was on the battlefield, it wouldn’t affect the soldiers on the fortress.

Astina quickly soared upwards.

By flying up, she could avoid the falling sword energy.

As Astina rose, the golden wave enveloped the ground.

‘This isn't the end.’

Aryandor was no longer visible as the ground filled with the golden wave.

A bright light from below obscured her vision.

‘Focus on the sound.’

In such a situation, she couldn't rely on her sight.

Bang!

“Hmph…”

Astina heard the sound of a leap and immediately activated her telekinesis.

Aryandor, wrapped in sword energy, leaped from the ground.

“Invisible Hand.”

Astina used her telekinesis to grab Aryandor's sword.

“Is it enough just to grab the sword?”

Aryandor let go of his sword.

If he held onto it, he could be captured too, so he released it.

Without his sword, Aryandor maintained the momentum towards Astina, clenching his fist.

His fist precisely aimed at Astina’s abdomen.

“A swordsman letting go of his sword?”

Astina laughed, seeing Aryandor targeting her.

Stones quickly sprang from the ground, three times the size of his fist.

She used telekinesis to launch the stones from the ground.

The stone was faster than Aryandor's approach towards her.

Thwack!

“Ugh!”

The stone struck Aryandor, and he was thrown sideways by the impact.

Astina, flying with magic, was unscathed as Aryandor's punch fell to the ground.

But then…

“Time… Back.”

Aryandor used time magic.

His body returned to the same place it was before the stone hit him.

He leaped towards Astina, who was still in the air.

The situation was the same as before.

“How arrogant.”

Wham! Aryandor's fist hit Astina's abdomen.

“Ugh!”

Astina let out a pained sound.

Her concentration broken, the magic keeping her airborne was dispelled, and she began to plummet towards the ground.

“Gravity…”

Just before hitting the ground, Astina used her magic to lessen the impact.

However, the battle was far from over.

Aryandor, once again, soared towards the falling Astina.

“Time Back.”

He used time magic again.

This time, he altered the position of the sword that Astina had previously seized with her telekinesis.

The sword reappeared in Aryandor's now empty hand.

He directed the sword downwards, falling towards Astina.

“Anti… Gravity!”

She tried to reverse gravity, attempting to send Aryandor flying upwards.

“Time Back.”

Aryandor used time magic once more.

Suddenly, Aryandor's body wasn't where it should have been in the air.

Astina quickly turned around.

‘The ground.’

The exact spot where they had confronted each other earlier.

Time magic was almost omnipotent, but it had its drawbacks.

Even if you rewind time, you only return to the location or action where you were in the past.

So, when Aryandor used time magic, Astina could somewhat predict his actions.

“Trying to unravel time magic, are you?”

As Astina turned around, she saw Aryandor.

However, the problem was his appearance.

The golden wave of energy was gathered on his sword.

The same sword energy he had used just moments ago.

“But even if you figure it out, you can't beat me.”

He didn’t just change his position with time magic; he rewound time to before he used his last move.

While Astina's state and her surroundings remained unchanged, his position and sword energy were reset.

“Golden Sword, Dragon Star Fall.”

Aryandor swung his sword, sending the gathered energy towards Astina.

“Gravity…”

Astina tried to use her magic, but the sword energy was faster.

The massive golden wave engulfed her.

Crash!!

“Ugh…!!!!”

The wave, like hundreds of swords, grazed her body.

Astina, just before sustaining serious injuries, concentrated and activated her magic.

“Barrier…!!!”

A protective magic enveloped her like a sphere.

Though it was a weak barrier and couldn’t block all the attacks, it diverted the sword energy enough to minimize harm to her body.

The golden wave that had scraped Astina soon dissipated.

Thud!

Astina fell to the ground from mid-air.

Her body bore dozens of wounds.

Fortunately, none were serious.

Astina wiped the blood flowing from her wounds and picked herself up from the ground.

She tried to rise to her feet.

Aryandor watched her struggle and smirked.

"This is the result of deliberately inducing time magic."

From the beginning, Astina had intended to draw out Aryandor’s time magic.

When Aryandor first used Royal swordsmanship, Astina had taken to the air.

Normally, she would have tried to escape from the golden wave that covered the ground.

But Astina didn't make that move.

Instead, she chose to counter Aryandor's attack.

“Thinking you could unravel time magic when you couldn't even decipher my swordsmanship?”

Aryandor was several steps ahead of Astina.

He had already read her thoughts.

Yet, he played along with what Astina wanted.

He judged that he could win even then.

“Neither McDowell nor Cromwell could unravel time magic. Do you really think you can?”

McDowell, Cromwell.

Both had faced Aryandor.

McDowell lost an arm, and Cromwell, who fought with the information gleaned from that encounter, achieved no significant success.

“Did you grow overconfident hearing praise at the academy? Thinking you can defeat me?”

“Haah… Haah…”

Astina, exhausted, forced herself to stand.

“Let that arrogance be your downfall.”

Aryandor, holding his sword, took steps towards her.

Astina, watching him approach, gasped for breath and spoke.

“You know…?”

“What?”

“That there’s something to learn even from someone weaker than you…”

“Nonsense in the face of death.”

Aryandor ignored Astina’s words and stepped forward.

Then, mana stirred from Astina.

“Ugh?”

Aryandor, moving slowly, suddenly felt immense pressure.

He couldn't move forward.

His body was forcefully pressed down.

“What is this…”

A focused gravity field.

It was a spell Astina had prepared earlier.

This magic wasn't solely her own creation.

In her second year, Luna had used a magical tool in a personal evaluation.

It was a spell that focused gravity on a point, pressing down a scarecrow.

Inspired by that spell, Astina had developed her own.

“And… just because I’m weaker than the professors doesn’t mean I can’t beat you.”

Astina’s lips curled into a smirk.

“I'm not alone.”

Aryandor sensed killing intent at those words and moved his mana.

“Time…!”

“Too late.”

Just then, a voice sounded from behind Aryandor.

He turned to see the face.

“Rudy… Ast…”

Crack!

Before Aryandor could finish speaking.

The fist pierced through Aryandor's chest.

He looked at the person who had thrown the punch.

It was someone who shouldn't have been there.

A man with the distinctive golden hair of the Astria family.

It was Rudy Astria.

CHAPTER 230
SPATIAL MAGIC (9)

"Aryandor…!"

When Rudy appeared, it was the moment he saw Aryandor being captured.

The flow of the fight, the condition of the opponent, the opponent himself.

He knew nothing about the situation.

Yet, Rudy reacted.

Astina lay in front of him, smiling as she fell.

And there was Aryandor's back in view.

Rudy threw a punch.

Aryandor's body was pierced through.

Just as one would pierce a piece of paper with a finger, Aryandor's body was pierced.

Aryandor fell to the ground.

"Ha… You came too late, didn't you?"

Astina said with a smile.

Though she said that, there was no specific promise between Rudy and her.

The only promise was that Rudy would come to save Astina.

Yet, Astina had set a trap.

She captured Aryandor and planned to harm him.

"I just need to set the trap."

Astina staged a situation where she appeared in danger.

She pretended to unravel time magic.

Aryandor was lulled into complacency, failing to grasp her intentions.

Aryandor might have understood Astina's intention, but not my trust.

Blind trust in a situation without promises or plans.

Even if Aryandor had realized this, he would have scoffed.

In a way, it was a foolish trust.

Yet, Astina believed.

It was okay even if there was no direct promise with Rudy.

Because he said he would come himself.

Because he said he would come to help in the most dangerous situation.

Astina, who had overcome everything alone until she met Rudy at the academy, changed.

Rudy was less capable than her, but she learned many things from him.

She learned to cooperate, realizing there were problems she couldn't solve alone.

By dividing tasks with her colleagues, she learned trust.

And so, Astina was no longer alone.

"I waited. Rudy."

Astina smiled foolishly.

"No, senior. Why are you in such a state…”

Rudy, not fully grasping the situation, rushed to Astina.

"Didn't I capture him well?"

"That's not the problem… What if I had been late?"

"I know Rudy Astria keeps his word. He said he would come to rescue in danger, so I planned accordingly."

Astina calculated every variable and situation in her plans.

One might say this plan wasn't calculative, but Astina had meticulously planned even this situation.

While trust can't be quantified, in Astina's calculations, the probability of Rudy coming was 100 percent, making it a perfect plan.

"More importantly, how did you get here? The way you appeared seemed like spatial magic. Can you use spatial magic now?"

"That… The magic I used wasn't mine. I borrowed some power to use it… But that's not important right now…"

Rudy was overwhelmed, worrying about Astina and checking on Aryandor.

"Yes, let's check on him first."

"Can you move?"

Astina's body was covered with numerous wounds.

There were no fatal wounds, but the sheer number was too many.

Astina responded with a smile instead of an answer.

"Yes, let's go for now…"

Rudy supported Astina and approached the fallen Aryandor.

Aryandor lay there with a pierced chest.

The ground was soaked with Aryandor's blood, like a flood had occurred.

With so much blood lost, he would die even if the chest wound healed.

Rudy leaned down and touched Aryandor.

"He seems to be still alive."

His breath was faintly present.

However, it seemed he would die if just a little more time passed.

"Then, I will finish this."

Astina reached out her hand.

"Are you going to kill him?"

"We have to. Who knows what might happen if we try to take him to the capital alive."

Hearing Astina's words, Rudy stepped forward.

"Then, I will do it. You're low on mana, aren't you?"

Astina shook her head.

"No, I started this fight, so I will finish it."

Astina was the one who provoked the rebels and brought them here.

Therefore, she wanted to end this war herself.

Rudy felt uncomfortable leaving the task to Astina, but he couldn't bring himself to intervene seeing her expression.

"Then, please proceed."

Astina nodded and moved her mana.

"Gravity."

Crack—

Just as Astina was about to use her magic to crush Aryandor's head, his body shone brightly.

"Huh?"

"What is this…"

Astina and Rudy looked at his body in disbelief.

Dozens of tattoos engraved on his body.

Tattoos that they couldn't see with the naked eye were now visible.

"…Magic circles?"

They were indeed magic circles.

Magic circles in the form of tattoos.

Rudy immediately shouted as he recognized their form.

"Astina!!!"

"The attack…"

Astina was using her magic, but it didn't affect Aryandor.

A protective shield from Aryandor's magic circles was guarding him.

Rudy grasped the situation and surrounded his fist with mana.

Light emanated from Rudy's glove, and he swung his fist at Aryandor.

His fist broke through Aryandor's shield and approached his body.

Boom!

Rudy struck down at the corpse, and simultaneously, a strong light engulfed both Astina and him.

"Ugh…"

"What…"

Rudy and Astina shielded their eyes from the intense light.

"Huh?"

That's when Rudy sensed something strange.

A feeling of the space twisting.

This strangeness wasn't just a feeling.

"Ah…"

As the intense light faded, they looked where Aryandor had been.

Aryandor's body had vanished like a ghost.

And then…

"Indeed, dying doesn't feel good."

From behind Astina and Rudy, a man approached, touching his chest where he had been wounded.

It was Aryandor.

"How did Rudy Astria get here? I heard he was definitely in the capital."

The wound in his chest had disappeared, and his clothes were unscathed.

Astina and Rudy looked at him with a sense of futility.

Aryandor looked at them and laughed.

"Why do you look like that? As if you've seen a dead man."

It was certainly Aryandor, who had nearly died.

Could he really return to his original state even in such a situation?

"Still, I'll give you credit. McDowell fought all day and only managed to kill me twice, but you've already killed me once. Perhaps you're even better than McDowell."

Aryandor was using his body as if it were a magical tool.

Despite being unconscious, he was able to use magic and defy death.

"Using your body like that will wear it out, won't it?"

"Do you think your body and mine are the same?"

Aryandor's body.

While his time magic and swordsmanship were outstanding, the most unique aspect was that he was a magic swordsman.

A magic swordsman could use both the physical abilities of a swordsman and the mana manipulation of a wizard.

It seemed this trait allowed him to perform such impossible feats.

"Besides, last time you conspired with the saint. Or was it from the very beginning? Another being from a different dimension."

Aryandor said this, looking at Astina beside him.

Astina showed no disturbance at Aryandor's words.

"So you already knew? I thought it would be a shocking revelation, but it's boring."

Aryandor looked at Rudy with a leisurely expression.

"The question is how you got here… Surely, only spatial magic could enable such an appearance. Have you already learned spatial magic?"

Rudy's method of arriving here.

It was indeed spatial magic.

But Rudy couldn't use spatial magic at the moment.

He had only succeeded in perceiving space and hadn't tried anything beyond that.

If he were to use spatial magic, this battlefield would be his first time.

'I can't use the magical tool again… '

How Rudy got here.

It was thanks to a spatial magic tool from the Astria family.

He had 'stolen' that tool, unobtainable even with astronomical sums of money, from the Astria family's vault.

No one present could know this fact.

Who would think that he had stolen a magical tool from the Astria family?

'It's best to stay quiet for now.'

Rudy let Aryandor continue to misunderstand.

If Aryandor thought he could use spatial magic, he would be more cautious.

Just as time magic showed transcendent abilities, spatial magic had similar levels of capability.

The question was whether they could win even with such tactics.

The fact that the opponent could resurrect even after being killed was a tremendous pressure.

'But I did sense something.'

Rudy recalled the distortion in space he felt when magic was activated in Aryandor's

body.

He had experienced this distortion once before.

Back when he was in his future body, Aryandor used magic, and Rudy had felt a similar twist then.

The relationship between space and time.

It felt like he had grasped a clue to this mystery.

Now, there was only one thing left to do.

"Rudy Astria, you are truly entertaining…"

Just as Aryandor was about to speak, Rudy brushed back his hair.

"Why so talkative?"

"…Talkative?"

Aryandor's expression hardened at Rudy's words.

"Always babbling. How can a man talk so much?"

Rudy said this as he manipulated his mana.

"Stop with the words and come at me, kid. If you're scared, just run away."

"Hmph."

Aryandor looked at Rudy with a cold gaze.

"So you don't want to prolong your living moments even a little bit."

He reached out, picking up a sword that had fallen to the ground.

"I'll kill you."

"Yes, that's more like it."

Rudy smiled.

Then, as if on cue, they both charged towards each other.

CHAPTER 231
SPATIAL MAGIC (10)

At that moment, at the Academy.

"He's not coming."

McDowell stood high up, watching the rebels in front of him.

They seemed ready to attack at any moment, but they were not making a direct move yet.

"Is this a diversion…?"

Still, he couldn't afford to underestimate them.

The moment he lowered his guard, the rebels might launch a full-scale attack, potentially causing significant damage.

Therefore, he had to be ready for battle at all times.

After all, even the rebels couldn't keep their soldiers moving indefinitely.

Being human, they too would tire.

They couldn't keep up the appearance of imminent attack for long.

So, until then, he had to maintain vigilance.

The problem was…

He had no information about the situation in the Persia territory.

He had expected some form of communication, but nothing had come through.

Whether they were too busy fighting or the rebels were blocking the information…

Regardless of the situation, it was clear it wasn't good.

If victory had been certain, they would have already informed him.

"But it's not like we can offer help in our current situation."

For ordinary soldiers to reach the Persia territory, even on horseback, would take 4 to 5 hours.

A knight with enhanced physical abilities could get there faster, but they wouldn't be fit for battle upon arrival.

Thus, the only one who could quickly move to the Persia territory and continue the fight was Ian Astria, a user of spatial magic.

However, his duty was as the commander of the Royal army.

The commander couldn't leave his post, especially where the main enemy forces were concentrated.

Therefore, McDowell had to think of another strategy.

A way to help without going to Persia.

McDowell pondered this while intently watching the rebels.

Then, a thought struck him.

"Is anyone there?"

"Yes, Principal."

At McDowell's call, a soldier bowed his head.

"Go down and call the commander of the Royal army, Robert, and Mcguire. Tell them I've asked for them; they will come."

Space and time.

In some ways, these were entirely different realms, yet in others, they were deeply connected.

Just a while ago, he had physically felt it.

When Aryandor used time magic, some change occurred in the spatial realm.

It was a dire situation, so he hadn't seen it clearly, but he understood that space and time were somehow interconnected.

Now, the problem was what to do next.

How to counter his time magic.

No.

First, it was his swordsmanship that was the problem.

"Royal swordsmanship…"

"Khuh…"

I twisted my body, dodging Aryandor's sword energy, and retreated a good distance.

From Northern swordsmanship to Royal swordsmanship.

And other techniques from prestigious families and various useful skills mercenaries employed.

Judging by his appearance, Aryandor seemed to be in his early thirties.

Ian's skills were no different from Aryandor's.

For someone his age, the sheer amount of techniques he used was unbelievable.

Of course, the problem was not only the variety of techniques, but also his use of time magic.

I was dumbfounded.

Even those called geniuses only learn one of the techniques Aryandor used.

Although their proficiency might be superior, Aryandor could use those techniques to a similar extent.

Being able to use a variety of techniques to such a degree of completion was inconceivable.

Especially if done alone.

I wasn't sure how far he could take the application of time magic, but as far as I knew, it only allowed for a slight reversal of time or foreseeing the future.

It was implausible to think he learned all those techniques just by seeing into the future.

If it were that easy, everyone would simply watch and mimic others' swordsmanship.

There is a law to secret techniques.

They involve certain methods passed down through generations, learned based on those methods.

So, Aryandor must have known that method to have reached such a level.

This raised a question.

Who helped Aryandor?

Someone who knew all those sword techniques.

Someone who could help him learn them quickly.

Someone with an incredible skill like time magic.

Whether it was the same person or different people, I couldn't tell.

I was just listing the necessary elements.

But, knowing this now was pointless.

Survival was the priority.

"Priscilla."

With her silver fur fluttering, Priscilla appeared.

As soon as she appeared, Priscilla grumbled at me.

"The stench of decay is overwhelming."

She seemed to be referring to the beings resurrected through necromancy.

Being a elemental in the form of a wolf, Priscilla had a sensitive sense of smell.

"For now, there's no time to grumble."

I spoke to Priscilla and then looked back at Aryandor.

At that moment, Aryandor's expression hardened.

“…An ice elemental?"

He seemed shocked.

As if he saw something he shouldn't have.

Priscilla and Aryandor?

They seemed unrelated.

I looked at Priscilla.

"Hey, do you know him?"

“…I've never seen him before."

Priscilla hadn't appeared when the rebels attacked.

Because I was in my future body, there was no chance for the current Priscilla to appear.

So, it was natural for Aryandor and her not to know each other…

That's when a thought flashed through my mind.

The connection between Priscilla in the future and Astina's death.

I clearly remember hearing that Priscilla made a mistake when Astina died in the future.

I turned to look at Priscilla.

“…What's wrong?"

If Astina died because of Priscilla's mistake, then not making that mistake meant Astina could be saved.

I didn't know what that mistake was, but it implied there was a possibility.

"Hey, Priscilla."

I lightly tapped Priscilla's paw.

"I trust you."

"What are you talking about?"

After saying that, I turned my gaze back to Aryandor.

Aryandor looked flustered upon seeing Priscilla.

I immediately charged at him.

"Kuk…”

Aryandor stumbled backward as I approached rapidly.

I seized the opportunity.

Mana surged into my fist.

Boom!!!!!!

"Kuk!"

My mana-infused punch hit Aryandor, who tried to block it with his sword.

But he faltered.

Although he managed to block my punch with his sword, his body was still within the blast radius of the mana explosion.

Aryandor sustained minor injuries and retreated.

"Gravity."

Astina continued the attack.

Despite being injured, Astina could still use magic from behind.

Stones around Aryandor levitated under Astina's spell, aiming at him.

Priscilla joined in.

Ice formed around them.

Rocks and ice shards flew towards Aryandor.

"Northern swordsmanship."

Aryandor, enveloped in blue sword energy, sliced through the incoming projectiles.

However, Aryandor was already shaken.

There is a flow to every attack.

Aryandor, once unsettled, could only block some of the attacks.

Most of them grazed past his body.

Small cuts appeared on Aryandor's body.

I aimed to continue this momentum.

"Hellfire."

Dark magic.

Black flames gathered around Aryandor.

Now, Aryandor had one thing to do.

Reverse the situation with time magic.

But my prediction was off.

“…Ha!"

Aryandor, surrounded by sword energy, looked at me and laughed.

Before the dark magic could activate, he swung his sword broadly.

His sword traced a large arc above his head.

Following its trajectory, a blue sword energy appeared.

"Blue Half Moon."

Blue sword energy erupted around Aryandor.

The blue energy swallowed the black flames I had created.

It not only consumed the flames but also incinerated everything else flying towards him.

Aryandor walked out from within the blue flames, wiping the blood on his face with his sleeve, looking at me with cold eyes.

"Where did that elemental come from?"

I responded to his question with another question.

"Where did you learn those sword techniques?"

Upon my question, Aryandor remained silent.

Seeing Aryandor's attitude, I smirked slightly.

His demeanor gave me some certainty.

Priscilla is the key.

She has some connection with Aryandor.

And then there's the time magic.

Aryandor clearly had the opportunity to use time magic but chose a different way out.

He left his wounds as they were.

Not using time magic to that extent ignited a determination in me.

I'll make him use time magic.

It wasn't an easy task, but that was okay.

I walked towards Aryandor.

Aryandor was strong.

A magic swordsman who used various sword techniques and even time magic.

In the past, I would have resorted to tricks.

Either relying on someone's help or planning a strategy in advance.

But now, I was different from before.

I had grown a lot.

I had faced death threats and fought many stronger opponents.

I had studied magic extensively and acquired various abilities.

I even created magical tools specifically for myself.

I had almost completed all the preparations I could.

So, I said, "I'll make you use your time magic at least once."

I looked at Aryandor and smirked.

I gathered as much mana as possible into my fist.

There were no traps or strategies.

Without any gimmicks.

Just pure strength.

Mana gathered, and a blue aura formed around my fist.

The aura grew larger.

From the size of a fist to the size of a human head, then to the size of a human body, and even larger.

It kept growing.

"Try taking this."

The blue mana that had gathered in my fist.

A pure concentration of mana.

No other applications were involved.

Still, I was confident.

The mana vibrated loudly, resonating around me.

Looking at the mana, I smiled and said, "If you can't take it, use your time magic."

I then thrust my mana-filled fist forward.

Boom!!!!!!!!

"Huh…”

Aryandor looked at the scene incredulously.

Pure mana was tearing everything around it apart.

Aryandor raised his sword to block the attack, but then lowered it.

And just as the mana was about to reach Aryandor.

“…Time… Back."

Aryandor used his time magic.

CHAPTER 232
SPATIAL MAGIC (11)

I recognized reality.

The phenomena and beings before me, even the flow of the air, I took it all in.

I confirmed everything.

Then, I looked deeper.

The flow of mana and phenomena invisible to the naked eye.

I felt them not with my eyes, but with my entire body.

I began to sense the entire space around me.

From the slightest movement of mana to the movement of a single ant.

I became aware of the entire space.

And then, I divided the space within that image.

Space into planes, planes into lines, lines into points.

As if marking coordinates in the space I occupied, I divided the entire space.

In this way, I saw the most basic framework of the world's space.

The basis of spatial magic is spatial perception.

This is how I perceived space, looking intently at Aryandor.

"Time Back."

Boom…!

At that moment, space twisted.

Like space bending, all the coordinates twisted.

There was also a loud resonance.

Feeling that resonance, I stared intently at Aryandor.

“…Gone?"

Aryandor's form had simply vanished.

Not that he moved quickly or underwent any other change.

His form just disappeared.

As I was startled by this, a voice came from beside me.

"Rudy Astria, what is this…”

The voice belonged to Priscilla.

"What kind of feeling is this? Exactly…”

Sensory sharing.

Priscilla and I shared senses, so she too could see the space I was observing.

I hadn't even considered that aspect.

But theoretically, there was no reason it couldn't happen.

Priscilla had seen the flow of mana I could perceive, so there was no reason she couldn't perceive the space as well.

"I'll explain later. For now, where is Aryandor…”

"Aryandor is…”

As I tried to find Aryandor, Priscilla pointed behind me.

Aryandor was looking at me with a rotten expression.

"We need to finish this quickly."

He uttered, lifting his sword.

His body appeared perfectly normal.

The time magic had already been used.

Confused, I looked at the coordinates.

Then, the coordinates returned to their original positions.

What in the world had happened?

The space shook, and Aryandor's form disappeared.

Is this spatial magic?

The most incomprehensible part was the disappearance of Aryandor's form.

No matter how one moved, a form can't just disappear.

Even if someone dies or moves extremely fast, their form doesn't vanish from space.

That was something completely against the principles of the world.

Aryandor, sword in hand, rushed towards me.

It felt like he intended to end this quickly, having shown me the time magic.

I stepped back and twisted my body.

Aryandor's swinging sword barely missed the front of my head.

"Rudy!"

Astina tried to use Gravity to press down on Aryandor.

However, Aryandor swiftly escaped from that spot.

The greatest drawback of Gravity.

Quick attacks were difficult to execute directly, limited to moving objects rather than delivering direct hits.

"Annoying ones first."

Aryandor, who had retreated, suddenly dashed toward Astina, kicking off the ground.

"Priscilla."

Just as Aryandor charged, Priscilla stepped in front of Astina.

Despite Priscilla's imposing figure intervening, Aryandor seemed unfazed.

"If you block the way, I'll just cut through both."

Aryandor, his sword wrapped in golden waves, swung it fiercely.

The golden light enveloping the sword engulfed both Astina and Priscilla.

Priscilla, seeing the golden light, pulled Astina into her embrace.

"You'll get hurt if you come out."

Dozens of waves crashed down upon Priscilla.

Although sword strikes hit Priscilla's body, her robust form meant she only sustained minor injuries, avoiding major damage.

As I launched an attack on Priscilla, I immediately kicked off the ground.

"Aryandor…!"

I charged at Aryandor, mana surging in my fist.

Aryandor lightly dodged my punch and counterattacked with his sword.

His blade sliced through my leg.

"Gah…”

Yet, I did not relent, throwing another punch.

My fist, charged with mana, hit Aryandor's abdomen directly.

"Ugh…”

Even though my punch hit Aryandor's abdomen, he only stumbled slightly.

The physique of a magic swordsman.

Having achieved physical enhancement as a swordsman, he could stand even after taking my punch.

Aryandor changed his gaze and looked at me intently.

"Are we really doing this?"

Without retreating, Aryandor swung his sword again.

His blade struck my body, and I threw another punch in return.

A fierce brawl.

Aryandor didn't back down, swinging his sword, as I continued to launch punches.

With minimal movement, I dodged his attacks while striking back.

Abdomen, arm, leg.

In just a moment, dozens of sword wounds appeared.

As I threw punches, I thought to myself.

Aiming for one hit.

The motion of throwing a punch is smaller than swinging a sword.

So, there's a chance to exploit an opening.

Then, Aryandor swung his sword diagonally from the right, using its length to create distance between us.

But I pressed forward.

"Guh…”

As I pushed forward, blood burst from my shoulder, and intense pain surged through me.

An opportunity created amidst injuries.

I couldn't miss it.

I reached out with my right hand towards Aryandor's face, pulling back my left hand.

I gathered mana in my retracted left hand.

Sacrifice flesh to seize the bone.

Aryandor tried to lower his sword to block my punch, but mine was faster.

"Ugh…!"

My fist connected squarely with Aryandor's abdomen.

This time, the sensation was different from when I hit him there before.

The sensation of not only the abdomen but also the ribs breaking was distinctly felt in my hand.

Aryandor was sent flying far away by my punch.

"Haah… Haah…”

I watched Aryandor rolling on the ground, gasping for breath.

The wound on my right shoulder was deep.

Yet, Aryandor's injuries appeared even more severe.

"Cough, hack…"

Aryandor coughed painfully.

I looked at him and smirked.

"So much for the leader of the rebels… I thought you'd be unbelievably strong, but you're weaker than I expected."

When we fought without using magic, just physically, he was an opponent I could handle.

This realization hit me as I took several of his sword strikes.

Aryandor's defense was clumsy.

Focused solely on offense.

He swung his sword, taking hits with his body.

There were many reasons for this.

Having time magic, he might not have developed the habit of defending, thinking he could just reverse any impact.

Or, with the robust body of a magic swordsman, he might have believed he could withstand any hits.

Yet, this worked to my advantage.

Just now, if Aryandor had switched to a defensive stance while swinging his sword, he could have minimized his own damage while only injuring me.

But Aryandor couldn't do that.

Even his attempt at minimal defense was inadequate to stop me.

Aryandor propped himself up with his sword on the ground.

"Haah… Haah…”

He leaned on his sword to stand up.

Aryandor stared intently at me and also glanced at Priscilla.

Then he laughed.

"You, spatial magic… You can't use it, can you?"

Spatial magic?

"Time Back."

As I pondered, Aryandor used his time magic.

The space twisted just like before.

And Aryandor's form vanished.

"I've been thinking a bit about how you got here. Clearly, you used spatial magic back then."

Aryandor's voice echoed from afar.

Then he walked towards us.

Completely recovered.

"But something was off. Even if you were conserving mana to counter my time magic, it was strange."

Aryandor let out a cold laugh.

"Using spatial magic to travel short distances doesn't consume much mana. Plus, you've been using other techniques without worrying about mana efficiency."

He pointed his sword at me.

"I thought you quickly mastered spatial magic after learning it in the future, but it

seems not. Even now. If you had mastered spatial magic after seeing my time magic once, you would've blocked it, right?"

I stared at Aryandor.

What exactly is happening?

There's too little information.

What was Aryandor afraid of, and what has he realized now?

"I've been overthinking and acted foolishly. No. I overestimated you. Rudy Astria. You're not the kind of person who can handle seeing time magic just once."

As Aryandor spoke, Astina opened her mouth.

"Rudy, stay calm."

Astina approached me.

"Think about it. If he's talking like that, it means the solution to his time magic is already in your hands."

Aryandor burst into laughter at Astina's words.

"Right. Since I reacted that way, it's only natural. But then, what now? He can't use those weapons in his current state, can he?"

Aryandor raised his hand.

"Time Back."

"Ah…"

Then Aryandor's figure disappeared.

"Rudy! Above!"

Priscilla shouted at that moment.

Above mine and Astina's heads.

There was Aryandor.

He fell towards us, sword pointed downward.

He was targeting Astina.

"Ah…”

"Senior…!"

I pulled Astina towards me.

Then, channeling mana into my hand, I struck at Aryandor's sword.

Clang—

Aryandor's sword energy clashed with my mana, creating a splitting sound.

Aryandor grinned.

"Time Back."

Again, Aryandor's figure vanished.

"Rrrgh!!!"

Priscilla rushed behind me.

This time, Aryandor appeared behind us, ready to swing his sword.

"Anti Gravity…!"

Priscilla blocked Aryandor's sword, and Astina cast her magic.

Astina's magic lifted Aryandor's body, but he shouted once more.

"Time Back."

"Ah…"

He used his time magic several times in quick succession.

This time he appeared far away.

"Why don't you try blocking it even once if you can use spatial magic?"

Aryandor walked towards us with a sneering smile.

I grasped my painful shoulder and furrowed my brow.

What's going on?

The space is warping, and there's a big resonance that ordinary people can't feel.

And then there's Priscilla.

What exactly is Priscilla's role in all this…

"Rudy Astria."

As I pondered, Astina spoke.

"You can do it."

Astina looked at me with firm eyes.

Then she approached me.

"My brain, my calculations say you can do it."

Astina pulled my head towards hers, our foreheads touching.

"It's not because I like you that I show this trust. It's because you can do these things that I like you."

I opened my eyes wide at Astina's words.

It was the first time Astina had said she liked me.

I had suspected it, but such a sudden declaration left me disoriented.

"You can do it, right, Rudy?"

Astina smiled.

Aryandor looked at us with a baffled expression.

"Ha… Then give it a try."

Aryandor raised his hand.

"Time…"

The warping of space.

The shaking space.

And Priscilla.

I looked at Priscilla.

"Priscilla."

"Back."

"Stop him."

CHAPTER 233
SPATIAL MAGIC (12)

Aryandor used time magic and thought to himself, 'Astina, she's the first target.'

He planned to move with time magic and attack Astina.

Astina had always been Aryandor's target, and there was no reason to leave her be as she was boosting Rudy Astria's confidence.

"Time Back."

"Stop that guy."

At that moment, Rudy's voice was heard.

Aryandor sneered.

Having witnessed the time magic but failing to realize its nature immediately, Rudy's success was improbable.

After all, Rudy Astria was an ordinary person.

When he moved time,

Boom—

Aryandor felt something obstructing him.

Despite sensing something odd, he attempted to proceed.

Click—

The view didn't change.

He was still standing in his original position, and the view remained the same.

"Huh?"

Aryandor was certain he had moved time around Astina's vicinity.

But, time hadn't moved.

'He realized it?'

That was impossible.

It was almost a confirmed fact that Rudy couldn't use spatial magic.

If Rudy didn't understand the theory of spatial magic, there was no way he could counter time magic.

To counter spatial magic, one had to use both spatial magic and Prisilla simultaneously.

Combining different techniques required understanding of both.

But how…

"Did it work?"

Rudy looked at Aryandor with a puzzled expression.

Aryandor, who used time magic, was still in the same place.

"Prisilla, what happened?"

“…I, I don't know?"

Neither Prisilla nor Rudy understood the situation.

Although Prisilla had used her powers, she hadn't acted knowingly.

It was possible because of her sensory sharing with Rudy.

Rudy had memories of using spatial magic in the future.

When Rudy lost his senses, Prisilla continued to be connected with him, possessing his sensory aspects.

These unintended events overlapped.

They couldn't be called mere coincidences.

Rudy's close relationship with Prisilla, his experience with the future body, and his start of perceiving space were not entirely his efforts, but wouldn't have happened without them.

Aryandor gritted his teeth.

"Saint…"

However, the glue that bound everything together was indeed the saint showing the future.

'We must end this now.'

But the situation wasn't in Rudy's favor.

He was severely injured in the shoulder, unable to use his right arm, and Astina's condition wasn't good either.

They had to end it now.

Having found a counter to time magic, he couldn't let him escape.

If they met later, he would undoubtedly become their worst enemy.

Aryandor shifted his target from Astina to Rudy.

"He can't be left alone."

"Time Accelerator."

As Aryandor cast the spell, Rudy shouted out.

"Prisilla!"

"No, not twice."

Prisilla exclaimed in panic.

At that moment, Aryandor rapidly approached Rudy.

Time acceleration.

This time, instead of altering time, he merely increased the speed of his own body.

'Now, I can't use time alteration.'

A different application of time magic.

Rudy could only counter time-altering spells like 'Time Back.'

Anything else was beyond his reach.

Therefore, Aryandor had to use only the magic Rudy couldn't counter.

It was important to kill Rudy, but not giving him any hints was equally crucial.

Fully understanding how to counter time magic at this point would make Rudy dangerously powerful.

As Aryandor was about to swing his sword, Astina manipulated mana.

"Gravity Field…!"

With the opponent moving swiftly, she expanded the area affected by her magic.

Gravity exerted across the entire space where Aryandor could move.

Although weak, it was enough to slow Aryandor down.

"Argh…!"

Aryandor, struggling against the gravity, tried to swing his sword at Rudy.

"Ugh…”

However, there was a problem.

Using magic over a wide area also affected Rudy with gravity.

Still, it was fine.

Rudy mainly used his fists, but at his core, he was a wizard.

There was no need to physically counter Aryandor.

"Behemoth…!"

"Bwooosh!"

A baby elephant appeared near Rudy.

Behemoth, the demon controlling iron and earth.

As Aryandor swung his sword, the iron melted away.

Suddenly, Aryandor's sword disappeared, leaving him swinging at the air.

"Prisilla."

Followed by Prisilla's attack.

Ice formed around Aryandor, attempting to capture him.

Yet, Aryandor continued to charge at Rudy.

Rudy, clutching his wounded shoulder, leaped backward.

'The enemy has no sword… But… '

Rudy recalled something he had learned at the academy.

A true swordsman can swing a sword even without one.

Aryandor, despite his legs being caught by gravity and ice, shook them off and walked forward.

"I will kill you."

Red light glowed in his eyes, and light wrapped around his hand.

A red sword aura.

The aura gathered, forming the shape of a sword.

"Damn…"

Rudy felt pain in his shoulder and clenched his fist.

He had to strike Aryandor, even while he was caught.

Rudy pretended to retreat, then stepped forward.

"Inhale…"

As he gathered strength in his fist to strike.

Clang!

A sword plunged down between Aryandor and Rudy.

A black greatsword with eyes on its hilt caught the attention of both Rudy and Aryandor.

"What…"

"…Daemon?"

Aryandor uttered these words as he turned around.

There stood Daemon, with a sullen expression.

The sword that had blocked Aryandor and Rudy floated back to Daemon.

"Commander, you must return."

"What?"

"Our base… it's under attack."

The rebel's main base.

The soldiers in front of the academy were being assaulted.

Aryandor's eyes widened at the news that the soldiers, who were only supposed to feign an attack, were actually being attacked.

"What are you talking about?"

"The academy has launched a counterattack. You must go there quickly."

Thud!

As Daemon spoke, Cromwell approached from behind, carrying the body of Jefrin.

"Who said you could leave?"

Daemon ignored Cromwell and looked at Aryandor.

"If you give the order…"

However, Aryandor responded differently.

"It can't be."

Holding the red sword aura in his hand, he looked at Rudy.

"I must eliminate him."

"Commander…!"

Crack.

"Our rebel soldiers are…"

"Gravity."

Cromwell cast a spell on them both.

"Argh…"

"Inhale…"

Both strained under the intense pressure.

"Who said I'd let you go?"

Daemon glared at Cromwell.

Then, a strong wind sound came from above.

"Groooar—!!!"

A massive figure flew in with a bizarre noise.

Bone Dragon charged at Cromwell.

"Anti-Gravity."

Cromwell used reverse gravity to deflect Bone Dragon's trajectory.

Bone Dragon narrowly missed, but its attack released Aryandor and Daemon from the gravity spell.

Daemon then gestured towards Cromwell.

"Groooar!!!!!"

"Screeech!!!!"

Undead attacking the castle changed direction and started assaulting Cromwell.

"Ugh…"

Cromwell frowned as a Lich cast a spell and a giant Golem attacked.

Then, a voice echoed from afar.

"Professor, move away."

From that direction, dozens of trees grew rapidly, and a green light gathered around a man.

He then released the light.

A technique deadly to the symbol of death, the undead.

A powerful life magic, manipulating vast life forces.

There stood a wizard skilled in ecology magic.

Evan.

Evan imbued his sword with the essence of life, sweeping away the surrounding undead.

Simultaneously, a huge dragon spread its wings behind him.

"Khuuup…”

Inhaling deeply and then releasing a breath.

It was the Red Dragon's breath.

Flames swept around, consuming everything in their path.

Seeing the situation, Daemon became anxious.

"Commander… you must go."

"No, I can't. If we leave like this…”

"Our people are dying…! And with this situation here. This is our only chance…”

They were running out of opportunities to escape.

Cromwell's abilities, coupled with the presence of the Head Elementalist in the distance, complicated the situation.

Additionally, there was the Red Dragon and Evan.

The circumstances on the battlefield were not favorable.

Aryandor clenched his fist.

He wanted to tell Daemon that the death of such people was insignificant.

After all, the end of the rebels and Aryandor himself was imminent the moment time magic was unraveled.

The empire, unaware of time magic, allowed the rebels to hold out.

A reckless attack could lead to being swept away by time magic.

Therefore, killing Rudy here was imperative.

It was far more valuable than the deaths of those other individuals.

However, Aryandor couldn't voice this now.

He had already established his public objective as protecting the people and promoting equality.

Even if his actions contradicted this outside, he couldn't afford internal discord.

At the very least, the leaders had to be unconditionally on his side.

“…Alright, I'll return."

Rudy, hearing this response, smiled.

Aryandor looked at Rudy with eyes filled with rage.

In the next fight, Rudy would undoubtedly have the upper hand.

This realization, coupled with the fact that he had to leave now, fueled his anger immensely.

"Then I shall leave."

"I said you aren't going…”

Cromwell, unaware of the fight between Rudy and Aryandor, attempted to stop them.

But then.

A gigantic mouth emerged beneath their feet.

It resembled a fish snapping up food floating on the water's surface.

Suddenly, a mouth from the ground engulfed both Aryandor and Daemon.

The monster swallowed them and quickly retreated underground.

"What…”

Everyone present widened their eyes at the abrupt occurrence.

The two had vanished underground.

Cromwell immediately tried to track them using mana.

However, there were too many mana movements.

It felt like monsters were released beforehand to distract attention.

Moreover, the undead on the surface began moving erratically.

Some started attacking fiercely, while others fled into the distance.

"Curses…”

Cromwell looked around.

Rudy and Astina were almost in no condition to fight.

He had to protect them for now.

As Cromwell frowned at the situation,

Rudy, still on the ground, grinned.

"See you later, you bastard."

CHAPTER 234
PAST AND FUTURE (1)

Aryandor quickly returned to the rebel base and surveyed the surroundings.

Most of the rebels had been injured and were resting.

Ian and McDowell.

Ian's spatial magic only reduced the scale of the leaders' onslaught, and McDowell, despite losing an arm, displayed powerful magic.

The rebellion's secret weapons, Aryandor and the necromancy of Daemon, had been absent, leading to this situation.

The rebel leaders clearly recognized this as a failure of Aryandor's strategy.

Yet, they did not rebel against Aryandor.

The anger among the leaders over Jefrin's death was not insignificant.

The leaders, who had been together even before the rebellion was properly formed, knew each other's circumstances well.

They had lost something crucial to the Empire.

Thus, their bond was deep.

In this situation, with Jefrin dead, they believed they would have made the same choice.

Therefore, there was no rebellion against the failure of the strategy.

However, they needed to quell the dissatisfaction among the soldiers.

"Aryandor saved us… we owe our lives to him…”

Thus, the leaders portrayed Aryandor as the savior of the soldiers.

This wasn’t entirely untrue.

The Academy's forces retreated when Aryandor, who had been in the Persia region, arrived at the battlefield in front of the Academy.

However, they cunningly hid the fact that if Aryandor had been on the battlefield from the start, the losses would have been much less.

Such wordplay couldn't completely soothe the soldiers, but it did allow for some damage control.

"So, what shall we do now?"

In this state, the leaders gathered for a meeting.

The morale of the soldiers was a problem, but there was a more pressing issue.

"How can there be a counter to time magic?"

The first to speak was Daemon, who had gone to the Persia region with Aryandor.

The reason the rebels could stand against the Empire.

It was thanks to necromancy and time magic.

Necromancy filled the gaps in their troop numbers, and time magic enabled them to counter powerful wizards and warriors.

Without either, the rebels couldn't have stood against the Empire.

They were neither superior in forces nor in talent to the Empire.

The rebels had relied solely on these two abilities.

And now, one of those trusts had been shattered.

The believed-to-be-invincible time magic had a counter.

Time magic, instead, became Aryandor's weakness.

Aryandor, relying on time magic, had focused his abilities on offense.

Without time magic, even Ian, Cromwell, McDowell, or any Academy graduate fought as equals to a novice.

The leaders' trust in their abilities was shattered.

"I don't know exactly."

"If you don't know, that's it?"

"Daemon, restrain yourself. Fighting won't give us the answers."

Venderwood, who was beside Daemon, stopped him.

Daemon calmed down and took his seat.

Venderwood turned his head and looked at Aryandor.

"Aryandor, I may not be wise as a former slave, but I understand the gravity of our current situation. Do we have any solutions or countermeasures?"

Venderwood had previously encountered the future Rudy in battle.

He had let go of Rie and Yuni, who were almost captured at the Academy, and had been defeated by Rudy.

With such a figure possessing a counter to time magic, the possibility of the rebels losing to Rudy alone loomed large.

"There is no solution at the moment."

"Aryandor…"

Aryandor stood up.

"But, I will try to find one."

With that, he walked out of the tent.

Venderwood sighed and spoke.

“…Let's end the meeting here."

Aryandor went outside and returned to his personal tent.

He then began writing a letter.

'I heard from 'that person' that Priscilla had disappeared.'

'That person' had dealt with Priscilla's previous contractor, and Serina, who was supposed to be the next user, failed to acquire her.

But how did Rudy Astria come to possess that elemental?

It was the worst possible scenario, an unacceptable situation.

Having a elemental near a user of spatial magic was bad enough, but a user contracting directly with one was the worst-case scenario.

Time magic was not a perfect technique.

There were many countermeasures to it.

However, recognizing those countermeasures as such was not an easy task.

Since others had not faced time magic, it was certain they would win before discovering it.

But spatial magic was an exception.

Even without facing time magic, one could physically sense it through spatial magic.

Time and space must approach each other's realms when used.

Neither spatial nor time magic is a technique of the current dimension.

They are magics used in the unseen dimensions of space and time.

The core of the world, two abilities used in similar dimensions.

When time changes, a twist in space occurs, and when space changes, a twist in time happens.

Each can sense the use of the other's ability.

The problem is, even if one can sense the other's ability, they cannot reach into the other's realm.

Time has its unique realm, and so does space.

Whether it's time or spatial magic, one cannot interfere in the other's realm.

Only those who have inherited the ability can access these unique realms.

Time magic must be passed down from a time magic user, and spatial magic from a spatial magic user.

Having inherited spatial magic does not allow one to interfere with the realm of time, and those who have not received the inheritance cannot even see that realm.

The reason space and time were called the realms of gods was precisely this.

'However… '

Just because one cannot see or reach into these realms does not mean the abilities are without flaws.

Even if time's realm is twisted, the ability must still be brought into reality.

This was the only vulnerability of time and space.

If one could block the application of these abilities before they affected reality, then no matter how powerful the ability, it would be meaningless.

Priscilla had played this role.

A person who knew spatial magic also had the means to counter it.

It was indeed the worst-case scenario.

'But the ability was not used perfectly.'

There was still a chance.

A chance to change this situation.

Aryandor finished writing the letter and manipulated mana.

"Time Regression."

The contents of the letter then disappeared completely.

Time Regression.

He slowly reversed time to make the contents vanish.

However, this magic was not continuous.

If the spell was broken, the contents would return.

The reason for using this magic was to maintain confidentiality.

An ordinary person couldn't undo this magic.

Thus, the letter would remain empty as long as the Time Regression persisted.

Aryandor took the letter with the vanished contents and headed toward the cage in the tent.

The person Aryandor was sending this letter to would understand.

The person who had taught Aryandor time magic.

He sent it to that person.

Aryandor put down his pen and sighed.

'Then I must make my own moves.'

The sound of birds chirping seemed to announce the morning.

However, it felt as if someone had drawn the curtains, blocking the sunlight.

Pain emanated from my shoulder, which didn't move well.

It seemed someone had bandaged it.

But last night, I clearly…

“Did I just fall asleep like that…?”

I opened my eyes.

Then I saw my shoulder, neatly bandaged.

“Did you sleep well?”

A voice came through.

“Astina.”

Astina, smiling, was in front of me.

“How could you just go to sleep while bleeding so much? Even if you received magical treatment, you should still sleep with bandages on.”

“Ahaha…”

I laughed awkwardly.

After the battle ended, I received magical treatment and, relieved of tension, fell asleep as soon as I saw the bed.

“Did you stay here all night?”

“You might have gotten worse.”

“Then why not leave a doctor…”

“How could I treat my savior like that? As the lord of the territory, I must take care of you.”

Astina smiled kindly.

Talking like this made it clear to me that I had changed the future.

I had succeeded in saving Astina.

I don't know how I did it, but I managed to counter time magic and saved Astina.

Although I failed to capture Aryandor, I was deeply moved by the fact that I had saved Astina.

“Thank you for saving me, Rudy.”

At Astina's words, I smiled.

“It was possible because others helped.”

Evan, Cromwell, and others like Astina herself.

It was possible because everyone was there.

Astina shook her head to my response.

“I'm not talking about yesterday.”

“Huh?”

“I mean a story from much earlier.”

“Earlier, you mean…”

“The story in the capital.”

Astina began to reminisce about that time.

“I was terrified. I pondered dozens of times about what would happen if I died, and I constantly worried about how to handle that situation. Since the time you said you would become strange if I died, I tried to stay away from you. Even when Luna and Rie were by your side, even when I had time to see you at the Academy, I did not approach you.

I did that so you could continue living normally even if I died.”

Astina continued.

“But I struggled anyway. I tried desperately to survive, to keep my life. I researched various ways to counter Aryandor's time magic and increased my strength. Still, I was lacking. That's when I joined the Royal army. I thought a lot there. Even if I died, you would continue living as yourself. I tried to accept that reality.”

Then Astina smiled and looked at me.

“That's when you came to me. And you told me to trust you. That you would definitely save me.”

Astina gently placed her hand on mine.

“Rudy, thank you. I owe my life to you.”

Her voice trembled, conveying her emotions genuinely.

Astina must have had many thoughts.

Who wouldn't tremble in fear at the thought of their own death?

The fear of death.

Doubt about oneself.

The surrounding circumstances.

All these factors must have pressured Astina.

Perhaps my telling Astina that she dies might have added to her burden.

Maybe it would have been better for Astina if she had not known about the future and I had just saved her.

Nevertheless, Astina stood strong.

She trusted me and believed in herself.

“All I can do is be grateful to Astina for holding on till the end.”

I said with a smile.

Then Astina sighed.

“At times like this, you can just accept the thanks. No need to deflect it as someone else's merit. But.”

She soon burst into a bright smile.

“I like that about you, Rudy.”

In the Royal Capital's meeting room.

“Ian Astria, you really did well. It seems you've greatly weakened the rebels’ morale.”

“It’s an overstatement, Your Majesty.”

“Overstatement? You inflicted significant damage on the rebels. With this, we can be at ease for a while. And Astina Persia, you too did a great job.”

“Thank you. It was possible because many helped.”

“Haha, speaking of which, Rudy Astria helped a lot, didn’t he? It seems like just a few days ago he was in front of me, and now he’s there…”

“Is he alright?”

“Yes, he is resting well.”

“Haha, Astina Persia. Thank you for answering, but I was asking someone else.”

The Emperor turned his head and looked to the side.

That place was the seat of the Duke of Astria.

Originally, it was where Ian sat, but now someone else was seated there.

Perrian Astria, the father of Rudy and Ian, was the one sitting.

“Do you know where Rudy Astria is now?”

Perrian Astria responded.

“I'm not sure.”

“So, you mean to say that a duke, even during a war, is not in the capital, and while his sons are achieving such feats, he doesn’t show his face. And he doesn’t even know where his injured son is. May I ask what you have been doing all this time, Perrian Astria?”

“I apologize, Your Majesty.”

Perrian bowed his head to the Emperor.

“I asked what you have been doing.”

“What would a retired noble do? I was just enjoying my hobbies and staying in my mansion.”

“Are hobbies more important to you than war?”

“No. I believed my sons would handle things well on their own, as they have grown so capable.”

The Emperor looked sharply at Perrian.

“You are still a duke of the Empire. Declaring retirement doesn’t mean you are retired!”

“I apologize, Your Majesty.”

The Emperor rubbed his forehead with his hand.

“Normally, I would have liked to severely punish the Astria family, but I won't, considering your sons. Until one of them officially takes over the family, stay in the capital.”

“I will heed your command.”

Perrian quietly accepted the order.

The Emperor then turned his head to look at the Chancellor, Jason Ophillius.

“Chancellor Ophillius, award Rudy Astria and Ian Astria separately, and keep Perrian Astria under surveillance for a while.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

“Then, let’s conclude the meeting here.”

With that, people in the meeting room rose from their seats.

“Ahem, ahem.”

“Is it time for a generational shift, perhaps?”

The nobles who had risen from the meeting were chatting among themselves.

It was gossip about Perrian.

Perrian, who had been scolded by the Emperor and almost punished, had his reputation thoroughly damaged.

However, his expression remained unchanged.

Even when he heard such snide remarks, he was indifferent.

The nobles thought he reacted this way because he was retiring anyway, but Perrian had other thoughts in his mind.

Necromancy in the Astria territory.

He was contemplating research related to it.

‘I can listen to such talk a hundred times over. As long as that research progresses properly.’

With these thoughts, Perrian left the room and headed towards his mansion.

At that moment.

“Finally, I can leave this place. Damn those children.”

A person was walking down a dark path, cursing under his breath.

A man cloaked in a hood, his body and face concealed.

His body was caked with blood and dust.

He was a man who had fought in the war between the rebels and the Royal army.

He had used much of his energy, and due to non-stop running, his stamina was greatly depleted.

'But I can't miss this opportunity.'

Now was an excellent chance.

Perrian Astria was away from his post.

Daemon of the rebels was too busy with his own affairs.

With the rebels defeated, they would have no time to pay attention to anything else.

Thus, there was no one to guard this place.

The man in the Astria territory was Rudy's mentor, Robert.

He had just arrived at the Astria territory, where necromancers were gathered.

CHAPTER 235
PAST AND FUTURE (2)

"Can you wait a little, Astina?" was my response to Astina's confession.

It might have seemed like a lukewarm answer.

It was a statement that could disappoint the other person and leave a lingering discomfort in my heart.

However, in the current situation, I couldn't accept the confession.

I had to take over the Astria family and find a solution to the time magic.

There were many other things waiting for me.

So, now was not the time.

"Well, I'm used to waiting anyway."

"But the longer it takes, the more anxious people become."

"This isn't just about me. Others feel the same."

"After I inherit the Astria family, I will come to see you again."

Leaving these words behind, I parted ways with Astina.

Astina went to attend a meeting in the capital, and I returned to the Astria family.

"Anyway……”

Rustle, rustle—

Sand and piles of stones caught under my feet.

In front of me, a collapsed wall was visible.

"What should I do about this……”

The library was in a complete mess.

The wall was broken, and stones were scattered around.

Since I was the one who had broken this wall, I could only sigh.

The reason I broke this wall was to enter the vault of the Astria family.

The Astria family vault, which I entered when Perrian taught me spatial magic.

In fact, I had many questions about that space.

Where exactly was this space?

Although Perrian had entered it using spatial magic, it didn't seem like a space created by such magic.

If it was a space accessible only by spatial magic, we wouldn't have had to come all the way to the library and then to a seemingly predetermined wall.

So, I suspected there was another space behind this wall.

Ultimately, my hunch was right.

They had created another space behind the wall and then blocked the path with another wall.

It seemed like it was made this way so that members of the Astria family could enter the vault using spatial magic.

But, why was it so recklessly destroyed?

That's because I broke it in haste.

To save Astina, I needed something.

I stole a magical device engraved with spatial magic from the Astria vault.

Stealing the device was fine.

Thanks to that, I could save Astina, and everything turned out well in the end.

The problem was that Perrian was coming to this mansion.

I'm not yet the head of the family or the legitimate heir.

If it's discovered that I robbed the family vault in such a situation, I would face a serious punishment.

I couldn't afford to receive such a penalty during the intense competition for succession.

"Is anyone there?"

As I called out, a maid came down to the library.

"You called for……. Oh!"

The maid's eyes widened at the sight of the library's condition.

It was a natural reaction for the maid to be shocked upon seeing the library, typically a quiet and sacred space, now disorderly with piles of stones.

I pointed around and said to the maid,

“This needs to be cleaned up.”

“Understood. How should I clean it up?”

The maid didn't ask why this had happened.

The previous maids would have asked and informed Perrian, but the current maids were all loyal to my orders.

I had dismissed those who did not follow my orders and brought in new maids.

This was something I managed to do while still part of the family.

Since neither my father nor Ian remembered each maid individually, it was possible.

I had given a generous amount of money to those I dismissed and warned them not to inform the family, so I could replace the maids without any issues.

“First, gather the rubble separately and cover the broken wall with wallpaper,”

I instructed, doing the best I could under the circumstances.

Though I would have to rebuild the wall with stones while Perrian was away, I planned to make it minimally visible as he was returning soon.

“I understand. I’ll call some maids and servants to handle it,” the maid said, calculating what was needed without further instructions from me, which I found very satisfying.

“Give extra rewards to those who work on this. Get it done as quickly as possible.”

“Understood.”

The maid then began to organize the removal of the rubble.

While the library was being tidied, a maid rushed towards it.

“Yo, Young master Rudy…!”

“Master has arrived…”

“Already?”

There had surely been a meeting at the royal palace.

I had thought he would chat with the nobles and return later, but my prediction was off.

I looked around.

The library had just begun to be tidied and was still in the early stages of cleanup.

“What to do…”

After pondering the maid’s words, I moved.

“Let’s go upstairs for now. Clean this up as fast as you can. I’ll keep father occupied in the meantime.”

I quickly walked up to the first floor, where I saw Perrian standing outside the mansion.

I cleared my throat, straightened my clothes, and approached Perrian.

“Father, I hope you have been well.”

Perrian looked at me, his gaze indifferent.

“Ah, Rudy.”

His eyes seemed to say I was of no interest to him.

“I’ve decided to stay at the mansion for a while.”

“At this mansion?”

“Yes, until I have permission from His Majesty the Emperor.”

“I see…”

Hearing this, I racked my brain.

I had to keep Perrian here.

I needed to think of a topic to engage him in conversation, but nothing came to mind. I had to have had conversations with Perrian to initiate one.

Moreover, Perrian was an enemy. I couldn’t delve into sensitive or friendly topics.

Perrian wouldn't immediately head to the library, I assumed.

However, my expectation was quickly proven wrong. When a servant fetched some

documents from the carriage, Perrian reached out for them.

"Give those documents to me," he said.

Receiving the documents, Perrian headed towards the library.

"Father?"

I called out.

"Hmm?"

I promptly caught up with Perrian.

"Are you going to the library?"

"Yes, I have some work to take care of."

"Then, why not use the office? I haven't been using that room, so it's well-organized."

"The office?"

Perrian showed a subtle reaction, seemingly hesitant to go there.

It wasn't an atmosphere of suspicion towards me, but I noticed the documents in his hand.

What were those documents about?

I recalled that Ian and I were sharing the responsibilities related to the Astria family.

With Ian occupied with the Royal army, it was clear that there shouldn't be any separate documents for me to handle.

Realizing this, I didn't miss a beat.

"Are those confidential documents?"

I watched Perrian's expression closely as I spoke.

A flicker of disturbance.

Seeing this, I quickly continued,

"The library is a bit messy right now. I've been practicing spatial magic there, and maids and servants are coming and going. Perhaps it would be better to use the office."

Upon hearing this, Perrian nodded.

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea."

I exhaled a sigh of relief upon hearing Perrian's agreement.

Did I manage to buy some time…?

"But," Perrian added, halting his steps towards the office and looking at me,

"I received a letter from the Mayer family."

"The Mayer family?" I echoed, puzzled.

"It concerns a marriage proposal."

"A marriage proposal?"

"The letter mentioned it's about time for you to marry, given your age."

I was baffled, dozens of question marks popping up in my mind.

"But why would the Mayer family… No, why to you, Father…"

"Karen Mayer," Perrian said, handing me a letter.

"Your childhood friend, the eldest daughter of the Mayer family, Karen Mayer. They wish to discuss a marriage arrangement with her."

The territory of the Astria family.

"Cough…”

"Only because the Astria family protected you, you managed to stay alive. Did you really think you were a match for me?"

Robert stood over dozens of people lying at his feet.

Blood was splattered everywhere, and the items used for research were all destroyed.

"Ro… Robert…!!!" a man with some strength left shouted at Robert.

Robert furrowed his brows and touched his ear.

"You don’t need to shout. I can hear you perfectly well."

"You… How could you do this!!! After killing the necromancers, you should've lived quietly in hiding, not come back to kill us twice!"

"I never killed any necromancers. In fact, it was you who killed people around me."

Robert’s indifferent words caused the man to seethe with rage.

"There's a limit to how much nonsense one can spout. You, using necromancy, got us caught by the Empire, causing us all to lose our homes and families. Now, living as dogs for the Astria family, you're going to finish us all off."

"Lost your homes and became dogs of Astria? What a dog's drivel."

Robert took a step towards the man.

His eyes emitted a murderous aura, and the man stumbled backward, overwhelmed by the intimidation.

"Why do you think I was caught by the Empire? Do you think I turned myself in for using necromancy?"

The man choked as Robert grabbed him by the collar.

"It was your scheme. You experimented on me. Thanks to your experiments, the

Empire discovered my use of necromancy."

The man gasped for air, screaming in distress, while Robert, sighing, threw him aside.

"Your antics cost me my son. And now you, claiming to be dogs of Astria, are killing other people's families. Isn't it ironic? You lament about losing your families and homes, yet it's all your own doing."

"We did it to survive… to stay alive under the Astria family…"

"So, if someone orders it, it's okay to do it? Should the person who ordered it bear all the responsibility?"

"It was to survive…"

"To survive, huh?"

Robert sneered at the man and raised his fist.

"If you have to kill innocent people to survive."

He then struck down at the man.

"Just don't live. Bastard."

CHAPTER 236
PAST AND FUTURE (3)

Robert looked around him.

"Please, save me…”

He had killed most of the necromancers, but a few remained.

Those who didn't resist, trembling with fear.

Robert did not kill those who did not resist.

There was no need to kill those who had already lost the will to fight.

He approached one of the women.

"Please… spare my life…”

"Have you been in contact with Perrian Astria?"

"What?"

Perrian had returned to the capital, but he wouldn't just leave this place alone.

He intended to make sure the laboratory was running as usual.

"Are you in contact or not?"

As Robert repeated the question, the woman in front of him nodded her head up and down.

"Yes, yes! We have been in constant contact!"

"Who was in charge of that role?"

"That… that person over there…"

Robert looked where she was pointing.

It was the man he had just killed.

He used to be in charge here, but now he was in no state to rise again.

Robert sighed.

"Then there's no choice. You'll take over the communication."

"Me?"

"Yes, Perrian must believe that everything here is still running normally. Can you do that?"

"I'll do it!"

"Also, clean up everything here. Release all the people you've captured, and burn all the experiment records."

"The experiment records…!"

"Don't like it?"

Robert looked at her with a menacing gaze.

"I'll do it!"

"Good. And don't think about escaping from here. The moment you try to leave, you'll die."

"Understood!"

Robert said this and moved on.

'No one will come to check this place other than Perrian.'

Unless Perrian was insane, he wouldn't have informed his associates about such an

incident.

If someone mentioned they were harboring a necromancer, they would be arrested immediately.

So as long as they exchanged letters properly, there was no way to know the state of this place.

As Robert stepped outside.

A woman was waiting for him.

"Hello?"

The woman, her eyes covered with black cloth.

She was the saint, Haruna.

"Why are you here?"

Robert narrowed his eyes at Haruna.

"It would be inappropriate to go inside, wouldn't it? Even if I can't see the brutal scene, I can guess what's happening from the sounds and smells."

Haruna smiled and tapped her covered eyes.

"That's not what I'm asking."

"Just a joke~. It's a bit awkward if you react like that."

Robert furrowed his brow.

"Drop the tasteless jokes. Why are you here? There's even less reason for a saint to be here alone."

"I've been traveling alone these days. Given the situation, it's too dangerous for the temple people."

"The current situation?"

"Aryandor. He must be grinding his teeth thinking about me."

The temple had become corrupt.

Aryandor, the leader of the rebels, could go as far as take the life of the saint if the temple was paid enough.

Robert nodded in understanding.

"Alright, being alone is one thing. But why are you here?"

"Well… I came to tell you some stories about the past and the future, Robert."

"To me?"

"About Levian and Rudy. I'll tell you their stories. And then."

Haruna smiled.

"After you've heard everything, you can write the current story."

As soon as the study was somewhat organized, I dressed appropriately and boarded the carriage.

"Head to the Mayer family."

Normally, when visiting another family, it's polite to inform them in advance.

But there was an issue with following that procedure.

'There was a promise I made with Count Mayer in the past, wasn't there?'

Something Perrian had said.

That I, in the past, had promised to marry Karen.

Count Mayer had mentioned it to Perrian because of that promise.

My head began to throb.

Although it was a story from my childhood, noble marriages often involve engagements from a young age, so it wasn't something to be dismissed lightly.

Therefore, I had to hurry to the Mayer household.

If I waited, Perrian might proceed with the wedding.

From Perrian's perspective, it would be more advantageous to marry someone from the Mayer family rather than someone close to me.

So I had to reach an agreement with the Mayer family before Perrian could proceed without anyone knowing.

"Young master Rudy, we have arrived."

With the coachman's words, I stepped out of the carriage.

Then Count Mayer rushed out to the front of the carriage.

"Young master Rudy? What brings you here…"

The robust middle-aged Count Mayer, though charismatic, wore a bewildered expression.

"Count Mayer, good to see you. I apologize for visiting without notice. I came to discuss something important."

"Something to discuss?"

"About a marriage proposal."

As I said this, Count Mayer's expression hardened.

"Would you come inside? I don't have anything prepared, but let's have a cup of tea."

"Yes, thank you."

I followed Count Mayer into the mansion.

"About the wedding… What did you come to discuss?"

I closed my eyes for a moment and then looked at Count Mayer.

"I want to cancel this marriage engagement."

“…The engagement?"

Count Mayer's eyes widened.

"Is there… a problem? With our Mayer family… or, perhaps Karen…”

His voice was full of panic.

Usually, canceling an engagement implies a significant issue with the other party.

I understood why Count Mayer was so alarmed.

"There's no problem with the Mayer family or Karen."

In fact, in this situation, I was the problematic one.

Count Mayer had only proceeded with an existing engagement, and I was trying to stop it.

"Then how about postponing the engagement for a while?"

"I think it would be better to cancel it. For Karen's sake, and for the Mayer family's… Oh, but that's not to say I intend to snub the Mayer family.

I am well aware of how earnestly you've been helping me."

"That's not the reason."

"What?"

"Our Karen is very fond of you, Young master Rudy. It seemed she had made up her mind after seeing you this time. That's why we wanted to proceed with the engagement again."

I wondered if I should not have acted in front of Karen.

It seemed my poor acting had come back to haunt me.

This made me think that people say not to lie for a reason.

"So, please reconsider canceling the wedding. This is not as the head of the Mayer family, but as a father asking you."

I returned to my family home and stared at the ceiling.

Upon reflection, time would solve this problem.

Karen was fond of the original Rudy Astria, not me.

The situation arose because I had acted in front of her; now, I just needed to stop acting.

So, I made a separate agreement with Count Mayer.

When Karen gave up on me, that's when we would cancel the engagement.

After all, time would take care of it.

When I met Karen, I would just need to show her the real me.

"Well, that issue is somewhat resolved, and now…"

What remained was to train in spatial magic.

I had gained some understanding of spatial magic.

I grasped the framework of space and could see new realms.

Yet, I lacked the ability to apply it.

The spatial magic I knew involved things like spatial slicing or teleportation.

Applying spatial magic meant influencing this framework.

Spatial slicing could be predicted as cutting through this framework.

But how does teleportation work? That was my biggest question.

In fact, teleportation and time magic didn't seem very different.

The concept of 'transferring' was the same in both.

I slowly recalled my fight with Aryandor.

Aryandor used time magic, and his form disappeared.

This concept of 'disappearing' was the issue.

Typically, in teleportation magic, the form doesn't disappear.

One might be visually deceived into thinking it has disappeared, but in a situation where one is aware of spatial magic, that shouldn't happen.

So what had Aryandor done to cause such an event?

No, let's not look too far ahead.

I need to understand the basics first.

Spatial magic is not a magic that occurs in the physical world.

It's magic that influences an invisible realm.

I mustn't forget that aspect.

"So spatial slicing is…"

Literally magic that slices through space? But I couldn't think of a way to slice through space.

I could only perceive space but did not know how to influence it.

"I wonder if I should visit my uncle…”

Then a fact suddenly struck me.

Perrian.

Perrian was in this mansion.

If there was someone here who could teach me spatial magic, there was no need to seek out my uncle.

Moreover, Perrian was someone who could actually use spatial magic.

He could show me examples, making him a better teacher than my uncle.

With this in mind, I moved towards the office.

CHAPTER 237
PAST AND FUTURE (4)

"Spatial magic?"

Perrian narrowed his brows.

"Yes, could you please teach me spatial magic?"

"Didn't I tell you to learn from Ian?"

"But, Ian is currently with the Royal army, isn't he? It's impossible."

At this, Perrian crossed his legs and glared at me.

"So, what do you expect me to do?"

"Excuse me?"

"Persuading Ian is a trial in itself, and it's something you should strive for. How can it be a trial if you come to me and ask for a solution?"

That made no sense.

"I'm merely asking for the assurance of basic educational conditions. Are you saying I should consider this my trial and overcome it?"

"Yes. Competition has always been different from the start. Trials vary from person to person. You just happened to face your trial at the beginning."

"But."

"Besides, if I help you here, wouldn't that contradict the fairness you mentioned?"

"You didn't teach me spatial magic."

"That's in the past. Currently, I'm offering no help at all."

I sighed deeply.

"Understood. I'll take my leave now."

I had much to say, but I held back any further words.

Continuing the conversation was pointless anyway.

Dialogue should be with someone who understands.

Speaking more in the face of non-understanding only hurts my own mouth.

Leaving Perrian's office, I clicked my tongue.

"What kind of tasks could he possibly have…"

The documents heading to Perrian were difficult to understand since he personally handled them.

Still, I guessed they might be related to necromancy.

That reminded me, what was Professor Robert doing?

If I get a chance, I should personally visit the Astria territory, where I heard they had necromancers.

Now seemed like the perfect opportunity.

Perrian was in the capital, and the rebels would be busy with their own affairs.

"It's unlikely that the professor would miss such an opportunity."

Still, I couldn't help but wonder.

If Robert was occupied with something else, he might not notice.

I smirked and headed to the library.

I prepared a letter, detailing the current state of the Astria family and the rebels.

Then, I handed it to a maid.

"Send this to the academy as soon as day breaks."

It was my form of revenge.

"And try to find out about the documents my father is handling."

"Are you referring to Lord Perrian…?"

"No need to force it. Don't touch things like letters. Just try to find out from the trash or while cleaning."

It was clear that the content would be about necromancy, but I intended to uncover other clues as well.

His documents couldn't be solely about necromancy.

There must be a plan starting with necromancy.

It was necessary to find out about the people involved in the plan and its contents.

I gritted my teeth and looked up.

"Let them have a taste of their own medicine."

After finishing my tasks, I resumed studying spatial magic.

Studying, in this context, meant simply perceiving the entire space and experimenting with various things.

I tried infusing mana into the space I perceived and fumbling to touch it directly.

However, no solution emerged.

How could I influence the space?

Our mana exists in the real world.

The space I was perceiving wasn't the real world.

I stared blankly into space for a few minutes.

“…Huh?"

Suddenly, I felt a slight twist in the space.

I stood up, sensing this distortion.

"What's this?"

I thought Perrian might be using spatial magic, but the magic wasn't occurring at the Astria mansion.

"In the sky?"

I felt the magic high above in the sky.

But it wasn't a strong presence.

A slight twist in space.

There were only two things I knew that could influence space: spatial magic and time magic.

Spatial magic naturally affects space, and when Aryandor used time magic, it also caused a twist in space.

So, it was one of these two options.

But among those who knew spatial magic, none could fly through the sky.

Ian and Perrian, having methods of transportation using spatial magic, had no need to learn magic to fly.

Besides, Perrian was currently in the mansion.

Ian's whereabouts were unknown, but it seemed unlikely he was flying in the sky.

I narrowed down the possibilities, focusing on the distortion.

The distortion didn't stay still.

It moved rapidly.

Eventually, the distortion circled in the air before descending.

It stopped within the Royal palace.

And then the distortion…

"Disappeared?"

It vanished without a trace.

Puzzled by this strange movement, I tilted my head.

Had I sensed it wrong?

Or, was this a common occurrence?

No one in the Royal palace knew time or spatial magic.

Perrian was with me, and Ian was at the Royal army's base near the capital.

Could it be Aryandor?

Was Aryandor inside the Royal palace?

If so, it wasn't something to be taken lightly.

"The Royal palace…"

I recalled what the emperor had said last time.

I could visit the palace to see Rie.

If Aryandor had infiltrated near the palace, Rie could be in danger.

So, it seemed wise to warn Rie during a brief visit to the palace.

"I should stop by tomorrow."

Muttering to myself, I surveyed the space again.

For several minutes, I looked around, but no change occurred in the space.

"What in the world is going on?"

The next day.

I woke up in the morning and headed straight to the Royal palace.

Upon arriving at the palace gates.

"Why have you come to visit me first?"

Rie greeted me with a playful scolding.

"I just wanted to see your face, check if you're doing well."

“…Did you come to ask for another favor?"

"It's not like I always come asking for favors."

"Hmm~."

She seemed to grumble a bit, but her face showed that she was pleased to see me.

"So… are you going to stay with me today?"

"That's fine. I don’t have any other plans."

I planned to walk around the palace with Rie.

There might still be traces of yesterday's event.

Hearing my words, a smile formed on Rie’s lips.

"Rie, I haven’t eaten yet."

I said, holding my stomach, and Rie chuckled.

"Alright. Let's have something to eat then…”

"Senior~~~!"

As Rie and I were about to go to the dining area, Yuni ran towards us from a distance.

"Oh, Yuni…”

As I raised my hand to greet her, Rie stepped forward.

"Yuni? Didn't you say you were busy these days? You must have a lot to study, and there's a lot to learn while Professor Gracie is at the palace, right?"

Rie narrowed her eyes and fired off questions like a machine gun.

Yuni gave Rie a sly look and smiled.

"Being busy usually means being busy on normal days. I can spare a moment, can't I?"

"But why spare that time now?"

"Because someone dear has come?"

…Weren't they close?

Surprised by their sudden quarrel, I tilted my head.

Why is Rie reacting so sensitively all of a sudden?

"Did something happen between you two?"

"Nothing happened~."

"Nothing happened."

Yuni and Rie said simultaneously.

Their words only made me more suspicious.

What had they been doing in the palace?

While I pondered, Rie pulled at my sleeve.

"Forget that, you said you were hungry. Let's go eat."

"Are you going to eat, senior?"

"Yes, yes."

"Yuni, you've eaten already, right? Maybe you should wait in your room?"

"No, I'll just watch you eat for a bit."

Both of them were quite headstrong.

Seeing them face off like that made me sweat.

"Why are they acting like this…"

"It's none of your business. Let's just go eat. You said you were hungry."

I was dragged along by Rie's hand.

As we neared the dining hall, I saw a man approaching from a distance.

"…Ian?"

"Hmm?"

Rie turned her head towards where Ian was upon hearing my words.

"…Why are you here?"

"Oh, there was a meeting related to the Royal army last night. Seems like he's heading back after an all-night meeting?"

A meeting at the palace all night?

Then what about the magic that occurred yesterday?

Ian, seemingly not noticing me, walked away into the distance.

"Anyway… it seems the meeting ended a while ago… Never mind. Let's go eat."

"…Okay, understood."

I followed Ian with my eyes, then let Rie lead me by the hand into the dining hall.

'It was definitely around here.'

Hours had passed since the meeting ended.

Yet Ian hadn't left but was still roaming the palace grounds.

He had certainly felt a strange current nearby.

'What was that energy, and why was it felt inside the palace?'

The meeting had somewhat concluded and everyone was resting when a strange energy was perceived in the palace.

A distortion in space.

For Ian, it was the first time feeling such an energy.

'Such a sensation doesn't happen with spatial magic.'

Then there was only one explanation.

Time magic.

The only methods to influence the spatial realm are through space and time.

Thus, it was reasonable to assume that time magic had occurred.

But why here?

Why time magic in this place?

Ian looked around.

This area was inside the palace, a location where lower nobility couldn't enter.

'Aryandor? No, that doesn't make sense.'

Yesterday, there was a significant meeting about the Royal army at the palace.

McDowell and Cromwell were there, along with the most powerful figures of the empire.

Infiltrating such a situation would be like suicide.

'Another time magic user?'

This had also come up in the recent meeting.

Who taught Aryandor time magic?

As the situation eased, people began to consider these possibilities.

But the occurrence of time magic inside the palace meant another time magic user was inside.

'A traitor… '

But that seemed too strange.

If the empire's internal information had been continuously leaked, the rebels would have waited until good information came out before acting.

However, the rebels moved without regard for such things.

'What on earth…?'

No matter how much he pondered, the answer did not come.

His concerns only deepened.

CHAPTER 238
PAST AND FUTURE (5)

The meal was nearing its end.

Initially, the constant tension between Rie and Yuni made the food stick in my throat, but as time passed, I got used to it and was able to finish my meal normally.

After eating, I set down my utensils and looked at Rie.

"What have you been up to lately?"

"Well, I'm swamped. Between learning Royal studies, studying magic, and with the war going on, I barely have time to breathe. Plus, I have some other things I'm working on."

"Other things?"

Then Rie pointed at me with her finger.

"Something about the Astria family heir."

I was surprised to hear Rie was concerned about the Astria family affairs.

"Your father is rushing the succession race. If that happens, your chances of losing increase significantly. You haven't solidified your support base yet, and your spatial magic is still unrefined."

“…That's true."

"Don't worry. I'm not just helping you for the sake of it. I'm considering the overall political situation. If the Astria family easily falls to Ian, it would put me in a difficult position as the future emperor."

"Difficult?"

Certainly, if I inherit the Astria family, the emperor's position would be significantly strengthened.

But there seemed no reason for her to be troubled if I didn't become the head of the family.

The noble faction and the emperor's faction within the Astria family had always been in conflict.

Nothing would change, and it wouldn't be a big problem.

"Soon, there will only be one ducal family left in the empire."

Rie's words made me tilt my head in confusion.

"Why? What about Duke Ophillius?"

I didn't know much about Duke Ophillius, but I was aware that he was a central figure in the emperor's faction.

"Duke Ophillius is retiring soon. Without a successor."

A successor.

The ducal family had no one to inherit it.

"What about Duke Ophillius's son?"

"Duke Ophillius doesn't have children. Not even an adopted son. He might have relatives, but in reality, they couldn't wield the same power if they inherited the family."

This was news to me.

"Most people probably don't know this. Duke Ophillius never talks about such matters, and being a deep thinker, people assumed he had a plan."

"Then why…"

"I talked with my father separately, and he said he was considering passing it on to

one of the relatives. It seemed like a decision made because he didn't want to appoint an unsuitable person as the successor…”

Expectations for the Ophillius family were high.

Being a central family of the emperor's faction and one of the only two ducal families in the empire, it was natural.

In such a situation, since Duke Ophillius hadn't married, he should have brought in a capable adopted son to meet the expectations.

But there seemed to be no one who caught his eye, leading to the current situation.

"So, what happens now?"

"If he doesn't find a suitable person among his relatives, Duke Ophillius will be the last of the Ophillius family."

"…”

"It might be for the best. Imagine if some unsuitable person took that place and started abusing power. It would only be a headache."

Rie shrugged nonchalantly as she spoke.

"Anyway, it looks like you'll definitely have to inherit the Astria family now."

"I'm the senior, so I guess I'll have to inherit it~," Yuni interjected from the side.

I was indeed trying my best to be in a position to inherit it, but it felt like a huge burden was placed on my shoulders.

"Besides, have you noticed anything unusual about your father's movements? Anything related to necromancy?"

"We're trying to find out, but it seems difficult to uncover."

If we made any strange accusations here, it could lead to an internal war.

Perrian believes we are unaware of their necromancy.

If they realize we know, it could immediately spark an internal conflict.

"Hmm…"

Rie sighed and stroked her chin.

"Setting that aside, what was discussed in yesterday's meeting?"

"Oh, that too."

Rie clapped her hands.

"Time magic was brought up in yesterday's meeting."

"Time magic?"

"Who taught Aryandor time magic and swordsmanship. Where did it originate?"

Time magic?

"…By any chance, who brought it up?"

"Your brother. Ian Astria."

I narrowed my brows.

The distortion of space that occurred here yesterday.

Ian, who brought up such a topic at that time.

I thought deeply.

There was a meeting at the Royal palace yesterday, so people wouldn't have been wandering around.

It was unlikely that someone sneaked in.

It was a gathering of the empire's power players; an intruder wouldn't stand a chance.

Then…

"Rie, Yuni."

I cautiously opened my mouth.

"Can you find out who attended yesterday's meeting?"

The person who used time magic must have been among those who attended yesterday's meeting.

"You've worked hard today."

"Ha, haven't you worked harder? Coming all this way."

"No, not at all. Duke Ophillius, you are getting on in years, after all."

McDowell and Cromwell were talking at Duke Ophillius's residence.

"That's true… That's why these days, even a single meeting leaves me sore all over. Hahaha."

Duke Ophillius laughed as he spoke to McDowell.

Despite being well over 70, he remained in politics.

The two great ducal families of the empire: the Astria and the Ophillius families.

If Duke Ophillius, without an heir, retires from politics, it would disrupt the empire's balance.

That's why he remained in his position as a Chancellor, at least until a successor was found.

But it was already too late to find and appoint a successor now.

Unlike the Astria family, the Ophillius family hadn't really passed anything down.

While the Astria family had always been responsible for the empire's military power, the Ophillius family represented the empire's spirit.

The Astria family passed down spatial magic to their children, but the Ophillius family only had a spiritual legacy.

In the current situation, whoever becomes the successor will not be recognized as the Duke of Ophillius.

Suddenly inheriting the family, it was hard to claim that they carried on the spirit of Ophillius.

The spirit of Ophillius was an endless loyalty to the royal family, the charisma to lead the nobles of the empire, and the wisdom that seemed to know everything. To possess all these was to embody the spirit of Ophillius.

Now, finding such a capable person was not easy.

Therefore, those around were deeply regretful.

If Duke Ophillius retired from politics, the spirit of Ophillius would cease to exist.

The spirit that had loyally assisted the emperor and even earned the respect of the noble factions.

"I should probably retire soon myself."

"Even if you say so, you're still healthy, aren't you?"

"Healthy? I'm nothing but an old man with the day after tomorrow on his mind."

Duke Ophillius chuckled in response.

"Tired from the overnight meeting, I'll retire now. McDowell, please show Cromwell to a place to rest."

Despite being a ducal residence, the Ophillius estate was modest, with only one maid.

Therefore, McDowell had to personally guide Cromwell.

"Understood. Please go in."

Duke Ophillius, receiving their greetings, entered his room.

Once inside, he took a letter from his pocket.

"Hmm…"

The letter was addressed to Aryandor.

Duke Ophillius stared at it for a moment before throwing it into the fireplace.

'Aryandor.'

As he repeated the name, wrinkles deeply furrowed Duke Ophillius's face.

'The future cannot be changed.'

Thinking this, Ophillius moved towards his bed.

Knock, knock—

A sound came from the window.

Turning his head, Ophillius saw a man outside.

Slowly, he walked over and opened the window.

"What brings you here, Robert?"

Robert stood at the window.

Despite the height of the second floor, such a height posed no problem for Robert.

"You could have just entered the estate, I would have opened the door. Why come this way?"

Robert, stepping through the window, bowed his head.

"I apologize. There are people below who shouldn't know I'm here."

"Cromwell and McDowell?"

"Yes, those two."

Ophillius looked puzzled.

Robert was known to be on good terms with both of them.

Yet, he had come for something that needed to be kept secret.

"So, what brings you here?"

At Ophillius's question, Robert spoke.

"I've come to know the truth."

“…The truth?"

"More precisely, the past."

Robert spoke with a steady gaze.

"Aryandor, he's the one you raised, isn't he?"

At Robert's words, Duke Ophillius's expression hardened.

CHAPTER 239
PAST AND FUTURE (6)

"What evidence do you have to make such a claim?"

"The spirit of Ophillius."

At this, Robert pulled out a piece of paper.

On it was a drawing of a pocket watch.

"Where is this now?"

"You suddenly show me a drawing of a pocket watch and ask me this?"

"Isn't this the watch carried by the Ophillius family heads? The older nobles might know, but I'll refrain from saying more."

Robert slammed his hand on the desk, pointing to the watch.

"But where is this watch now?"

Ophillius couldn't bring himself to speak.

As Ophillius remained silent, Robert spoke up.

"That watch, Aryandor has it, doesn't he?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Then Robert lifted the paper with the pocket watch drawn on it.

"Principal McDowell would know. Shall we go together?"

"McDowell?"

Robert let out a small laugh.

"Have you ever seen Principal McDowell's flash magic?"

"I haven't seen it…"

"That's why Aryandor recorded the flash magic in the pocket watch. He's not even from the Ophillius family, but he seems quite diligent in his records. Haha."

The spirit of Ophillius.

It wasn't something like a character trait passed down through blood.

It was the past recorded through time magic and all the information – this was the true spirit of Ophillius.

A family that remembered thousands, tens of thousands of past events and responded to everything.

That was the Ophillius family.

"You know things you shouldn't. How much do you know, and who told you?"

Robert couldn't have witnessed the fight between McDowell and Aryandor.

If Robert had been there, McDowell wouldn't have lost his arm.

Yet, he knew Aryandor had used the pocket watch.

To this, Robert calmly replied.

"I heard it from the saint."

"What is the saint thinking? Telling you such a story means…"

"I don't know what she is thinking. I just heard the story."

"Huh…"

Ophillius sighed and sat down.

"So, you know the entire past?"

"Yes."

"You came to kill me?"

"That's not it."

Ophillius looked puzzled.

"Didn't you say you heard about the past?"

"Yes."

"That it was me who killed your son and the wife of the head elementalist?"

"That's correct."

Ophillius wore a look of defeat at Robert's words.

"I don't understand the saint's thoughts, nor yours."

"If I were to follow my heart, I'd pierce through your neck right now. You're the one who caused my son's death. But…"

Robert smiled sadly.

"I have people around me who need to continue moving forward into the future. You know what would happen if I killed you here."

"Is it because Aryandor would become stronger?"

Time and spatial magic.

This continuation revealed a significant downside to both time and spatial magic.

The reason only a few had monopolized these powers wasn't due to a desire for exclusivity.

The more people who shared these powers, the weaker they became.

If only one person used these abilities, they could wield their original strength, but as more people did, each individual's power diminished.

Therefore, Robert couldn't kill Ophillius.

If Ophillius were to die, Aryandor's monopolization of time magic might become unmanageable.

Although it was somewhat possible to counteract now, without Ophillius, stopping Aryandor could be impossible.

"I choose the future over my revenge," Robert declared.

"Why have you come here then?" asked Ophillius.

"I have a request," Robert replied.

"A request?"

"Survive. Survive until everything is over. If you think you must atone to me and others, forget about your dignity and just live."

Ophillius looked at Robert incredulously.

"Is that a request you make to your enemy?"

"You needn't worry about that."

Robert turned and walked towards the window.

Ophillius, who knew thousands of futures through time magic, couldn't fathom what Robert was thinking.

"Robert, I may not know what's on your mind, but let me give you one piece of advice as someone who handles time," Ophillius spoke.

Robert turned his head.

"Don't try to defy the future. There are countless possibilities, but most are already determined. If you live only for the future, the present will disappear."

Even though Rudy could use time magic, he couldn't see the future anymore due to the intervention from another dimension.

Yet, he knew the future wouldn't change much.

New interventions might alter it, but they couldn't change the entire future.

At best, it would only change one person's fate.

"I know whom you trust, but an individual can't change the whole," Ophillius advised.

"It's okay,"

Robert replied nonchalantly, turning his head away.

"He's not just an individual."

With that, Robert leapt out of the window.

I returned to the mansion, deep in thought.

"A time wizard among the empire's key figures…"

My list of tasks had grown.

Finding a hidden time wizard was a daunting addition to dealing with spatial magic.

The problem was that this time wizard didn't seem to be aiding the rebels.

'If that person was really helping the rebels, wouldn't they have caused chaos during Aryandor's attack? Or perhaps led the rebels to a favorable battle?'

I agreed with Rie's speculation.

Despite everything, the individual's dangerous nature remained unchanged.

Regardless of intent, this person had raised Aryandor and even used time magic in

the Royal palace.

It was imperative to understand who this person was and their intentions.

I looked at the list of people who were present when the time magic occurred.

The Empire's head wizard, head elementalist, the Principal and Vice-Principal of Libereion Academy, the Chancellor, and others with influence in the Empire were all gathered there.

Of course, Perrian was not included.

Being out of politics for a long time, Perrian knew little about the current state of affairs and seemed to have been excluded.

Among them, those who might have the ability to use time magic were the Empire's head wizard and the Chancellor, Jason Ophillius.

They were old enough to have raised Aryandor and were unknown to me in detail.

Yet, these two were known for their loyalty to the Empire.

This was especially true for Chancellor Ophillius, and the head wizard had long served the Emperor at the wizard Tower.

"But I can't just suddenly go looking for the head wizard or the Chancellor…"

Both were extremely busy individuals.

Even if they had dozens of bodies, meeting me seemed unlikely.

"…Wait a minute."

Suddenly, Luna came to mind.

She was currently in the Royal wizard Tower.

With Luna, maybe I could meet the head wizard?

As I contemplated this and prepared to act, a sense of self-reproach hit me.

First Rie, now Luna.

It felt like I was going on a tour, constantly seeking help.

In that state, I clenched my fist.

“…I can repay it twice over later."

With a gambler's mindset, determined to pay back what I owed, I headed towards Luna.

"Rudy!!"

As I waited in front of the Royal wizard Tower, Luna burst out of the entrance.

I hadn't contacted her directly but asked the guards to call her, so she came out herself.

"Luna, sorry for calling you out of the blue."

"Ehehe, no, I was free anyway. Seeing Rudy's face makes me happier!"

Luna smiled brightly at me.

"Yes, you can go in now," the guard said, and we entered the wizard Tower.

"I heard Astina was in danger. Rudy, you got hurt trying to save her, are you okay now?"

"Yeah, I received healing magic right away, so I'm fine now. How have you been, Luna?"

"Hmm! I made my own magical tool and submitted a paper! I'm the first in the wizard Tower to write a paper so quickly after joining!"

"Wow!"

Luna had always been adept at paperwork since our Academy days.

With her talent in magic circles, it seemed she had achieved such a feat.

"What kind of magical tool did you make?"

"A device to bind wizards! There was already an existing device, but I made the magic circuit more efficient!"

"More efficient?"

"Yes, I made it so that even with lower-quality manastones than the ones originally used, it could achieve the same efficiency!"

Luna rummaged through her bag and pulled out two small rings.

The rings resembled handcuffs and were designed to bind a person's arms.

"So, if you wear these handcuffs, you can't use mana?"

"Yes! Let me show you."

Luna, with a confident attitude, slipped the handcuffs onto her own arms.

Then, she attempted to manipulate mana.

I read the flow of mana and tilted my head in confusion.

"The mana is still flowing?"

"Yes, but that's okay. It prevents the use of magic."

Luna explained and then shouted an incantation.

"Fireball!"

Mana flowed towards Luna's hand.

Fizz—

The mana trying to escape Luna fizzled out disappointingly.

"In the past, mana flow itself was blocked to prevent the use of magic, but what I made disrupts the conversion of mana into magic!"

Although I didn't understand exactly how she modified it, it was clear that she had achieved something remarkable.

Luna had grown in her own way. She had been outstanding during our Academy days, but now she was influencing the entire Empire.

A smile formed on my face seeing Luna's progress.

"That's impressive."

Luna, perhaps embarrassed by my praise, bowed her head and scratched her hair.

"But how do we unlock this now?"

The sight of Luna scratching her head with the handcuffs on felt somewhat odd.

There must be a way to unlock them.

I hadn't seen anything like a keyhole when I looked earlier.

"Oh, there's a separate unlocking spell for that…"

Luna said this while looking at the handcuffs.

The person wearing the handcuffs was Luna, and the one who knew the unlocking spell was also Luna.

"Ah…"

Luna stared blankly at the handcuffs for a few seconds, then slowly raised her head, making a pitiful face at me.

"Ru, Rudy… Can you unlock this for me…"

"…"

Luna's skills might have changed, but her personality was still the same.

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PAST AND FUTURE (7)

Luna and I both bowed our heads.

"I'm sorry……”

"Ahaha……. That can happen."

The handcuffs were finally removed after Luna visited another wizard.

It took some time, but it didn't hinder our progress.

"Suspecting the head wizard?"

"It's a suspicion……. but I came to check, just in case."

The candidates we had considered were the Empire's head wizard and the Chancellor.

Anyone nearby would say it's foolish.

Considering what the two have sacrificed for the Empire, it seemed implausible.

But still, we couldn't not investigate.

They could have been feigning loyalty to the Empire while engaging in questionable activities.

"So……. should we ask the head wizard directly?"

“…….That's not possible."

Whether that person is a user of time magic or not, they would respond the same.

A real time wizard wouldn't just admit, 'Yes, I use time magic~', would they?

"Then?"

"There's the head wizard's private library."

"Yes, that exists. But how do we get in……”

I pulled out a small necklace from my pocket.

The necklace had a transparent orb emitting a mysterious light, but it was cracked.

"What is that?"

"A magical tool that enables spatial magic."

It was the tool I used when going to rescue Astina.

It was only used once, but it was in terrible condition.

It seemed it would break with even the slightest touch.

Even well-crafted tools seemed unable to withstand spatial magic.

Luna, holding the necklace, looked at it blankly then frowned.

"Isn't this……. broken?"

"It seems almost unusable, but it might work for short distances."

There was still mana left in the necklace.

It seemed capable of use, but unlikely for long distances like last time.

"So, what do we do……?"

"I'll go into the private library alone. Luna, you get the head wizard to open the door. I'll sneak out in the meantime."

Given the state of the necklace, it seemed it could only be used once more.

So, when exiting, someone's help would be necessary.

"Me, lure the head wizard into the private library? More importantly, can you sneak out when the head wizard enters?"

"We have to try. If the door is open, I think I can find a way out……”

I couldn't give a definitive answer.

It might be possible with a normal vault, but this was the Empire's head wizard.

Unknown magics could be set up there.

"This seems too reckless……”

"It's okay. The tool might not break in one use, and if it does, there's another way."

"Another way?"

"I'll claim the tool activated automatically due to its poor condition."

“……Will that work?"

"Since no one knows about spatial magic, they can't outright say it's a lie."

No tool for spatial magic exists, even in the Royal Tower of Magic.

So, even if I made up some excuse, there would be no way to verify whether my words were true or not.

I didn't believe the head wizard of the Empire, who was on our side, would do anything to me.

If there was nothing incriminating against me, I wouldn't be pursued.

"Shall we try then?"

With that, I separated from Luna and headed towards the upper floors of the wizard Tower.

According to Luna, the head wizard's library was located at the very top of this tower.

My destination was deeper inside, the head wizard's personal research lab, beyond the library.

While high-ranking individuals could enter the library, the research lab was off-limits to everyone except the head wizard.

It contained materials that the head wizard was personally researching.

These materials were national secrets and almost treasures.

If they fell into the wrong hands, the magical documents, dangerous if misused, were piled up in a room that no one but the Emperor could enter.

Usually, high-ranking families store their documents in their personal residences.

The head wizard, although a noble of high standing, was an honorary noble without a domain.

As a nominal noble without a proper mansion, it was certain that all his valuables, including personal items, were in his lab.

Thump-thump—

"Is this the place……?"

I knocked on the ceiling.

I was in the library directly below the head wizard's research lab.

It was a library used by the Royal Wizards, accessible to everyone, but I had struggled to get here.

It wouldn't be good if it was discovered that I, not an Royal wizard, was wandering around alone, so I came here without attracting attention.

Closing my eyes, I focused upward, sensing the flow of mana and the space around me.

The room above the ceiling was enveloped in mana.

I wasn't sure exactly what kind of magic it was, but it seemed designed to prevent external intrusion.

However, such magic was not a major concern for me.

Ordinary people would definitely have to pass through this magic as it covered the entire wall.

But, with teleportation magic, I could enter without passing through the wall, so it wasn't an issue.

I held the necklace in my hand and looked upwards.

"Teleport."

Suddenly, a strong light emanated from the necklace.

It enveloped me, and my surroundings shifted.

Numerous bookshelves and books appeared.

Although I was already in a library, this room was different.

Unorganized books were stacked on the side, and some books were heavily coated with dust.

It seemed disorganized because it was inaccessible to most.

"I'm in."

Clang—

But then, the magical tool shattered.

I had anticipated this, but still, seeing it break made me sigh.

Is Luna my only hope now……?

I wondered if I had put too much pressure on her.

But I couldn't just stand still.

I put the broken tool in my pocket and looked around the room.

Compared to the library I had just been in, shabbier books caught my eye here.

I browsed through them as I moved forward.

Then, another bookshelf appeared.

The room was like a maze, and since the entire top floor was the head wizard's area, I had expected some empty space, but it was packed with books.

Not all of them were printed; some seemed to be handwritten, possibly by previous generations of head wizards.

As I meandered around, I stumbled upon a door.

One looked like an exit, and the other…

"Is that the research lab?"

I cautiously approached the room, and out of curiosity, I read the flow of mana again.

"Ah…"

Mana spread like a spider's web.

Inside the room, dozens of mana strands extended.

It was as if the mana was filling the room like yarn in a spool.

If I entered now, I'd be discovered immediately.

"There's no way the head wizard didn't prepare for this."

A person like the head wizard would undoubtedly know about spatial magic.

The magic in the lab seemed to be a countermeasure against spatial magic.

While I could get into the library, the inner lab was off-limits.

The head wizard seemed to be saying just that.

What should I do?

I had read the mana flow before entering the library, but from outside, it was too faint to detect.

The flow was weak, indicating the magic wasn't strong, but the sheer quantity was overwhelming.

It would take ages to dismantle them one by one.

I stood in front of the room, pondering over the flow.

Just then, as I was deep in thought…

“……Rudy Astria?"

Suddenly, a voice came from behind me.

There was no sound of approach.

Where did it come from?

I quickly turned around.

Behind me stood a man resembling me, a bit taller, with blonde hair.

It was my brother, Ian Astria.

"……?"

I stared at Ian, puzzled.

"Why are you here?"

“……Why are you here?"

I asked, glancing around.

Nothing else had changed.

“……Did you come in using spatial magic?"

"Yes. How did you get here? You can't use spatial magic yet, can you?"

I couldn't let Ian find out about the magical tool; it was stolen from a vault.

"I made my own arrangements."

“……Hmm."

Ian looked at me skeptically, then scanned the area.

"Doesn't seem like you had permission to enter."

"Isn't that the same for you?"

"Why did you come here?"

"Why did you come?"

I parroted his question, and Ian ran his hand through his hair.

"We won't gain anything by staying here for long. Answer me quickly."

"You first. If we're caught here, it's worse for you, isn't it?"

Ian scowled and glared at me before speaking.

"The head wizard is suspected of using time magic."

Hearing this, I felt that my suspicions held some credibility.

"Is it because of the time magic incident in the palace?"

"You know about it?"

"If so, there's no need for further explanation."

Our goals aligned.

The head wizard's research lab.

I extended my hand towards the lab.

"Can you handle the magic inside?"

I didn't think highly of Ian, but his magical skills were superior to mine.

Having followed the elite course since the academy, Ian's current abilities were beyond my estimation.

Ian walked towards the front of the lab.

"Hmm…"

He briefly examined the room, then spoke.

"It's not impossible."

Why say 'not impossible' instead of just possible?

I narrowed my eyes and looked at Ian.

"That means it's going to be difficult."

As if reading my thoughts, Ian added and extended his hand.

"Let's go inside."

"Right now?"

As soon as I spoke, Ian opened the door to the research lab.

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PAST AND FUTURE (8)

"……?"

My eyes widened and looked around the room.

The first thing that caught my eye was dozens of portraits.

Portraits on the wall and the writing next to them.

In the center, there was a picture of Perrian Astria hanging.

"What is this?"

I narrowed my eyes and read the letters written next to it.

[Where do you intend to use necromancy?]

Reading that made me feel like I had been hit on the back of the head.

I quickly looked at the portraits next to it as well.

There were portraits of Daemon, the leader of the rebels, portraits of a teacher defeated by Robert in the past, and portraits of family heads related to the Astria family like the Fred family.

This was a relationship diagram between the Astria family and necromancers.

"They were investigating necromancy?"

I hadn't imagined it.

It wasn't only Robert who was digging into the Astria family's background.

A head wizard was also digging into the Astria family's background like us.

I looked at Ian, putting my surprise behind me.

Ian was surprised like me, but it was clear this wasn't the first time he had seen something like this.

"Did you know?"

"I didn't know the head wizard was investigating this."

That meant Ian was aware that necromancy was being studied.

"How did you know?"

"I found out by chance. More importantly, see if there is anything about time magic."

Ian, touching the wall.

He was commanding me, unable to take his hand off the wall.

"Understood."

I immediately entered the room.

After that, I quickly looked around the desk and drawers.

But I didn't find any evidence.

Knowing that they were investigating the Astria family, one could say the suspicion of being a time magic user was cleared.

The time magic user was someone who was hiding the fact that they were a time magic user and had raised Aryandor.

I wasn't sure of the exact intention, but I thought that person wouldn't do anything beneficial for the empire.

"There is nothing worth mentioning. It's all about the Astria family……”

“……Then come out quickly."

Ian yelled at me, clearly struggling to control his magic.

I tried to quickly leave the room.

At that moment, Ian raised his eyebrows.

Ian quickly took his hand off the wall and turned around.

Then he stretched his hand forward.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Rudy……”

Behind Ian, there was the head wizard pointing his staff at Luna.

I looked at the clock next to me, surprised by the sudden appearance of the head wizard.

It wasn't time for my appointment with Luna yet.

The appointment with Luna was in an hour.

Yet, even though it hadn't been 30 minutes, the head wizard had arrived.

"How did you know?"

"You wouldn't investigate the Astria family without being prepared for Astria's spatial magic, would you?"

Ian wouldn't have used magic carelessly.

That means the head wizard knew we had entered from the start.

"Are you not going to lower that hand?"

The head wizard tapped Ian's head with his staff.

Ian carefully lowered his hand that had been stretched out.

"Then answer my question. If you don't tell the truth or even move your mana slightly, your head will fly off immediately."

"Understood."

"When did you know that Perrian was harboring necromancers?"

"Not long ago."

"How did you find out?"

"My father told me directly."

"So, are you saying you're also part of it?"

"No."

"Hmm…"

The head wizard smacked his lips after hearing Ian's answer.

"Even if Rudy is one thing, you're the problem."

"You don't have to worry about that. I didn't come here for that reason."

"Then why did you come?"

"I suspected you were a time magic user."

"…Time magic user?"

When Ian said that, the head wizard's eyes turned towards me.

"…I thought the same."

"Ha… How could you both have such a misunderstanding? Didn't Robert tell you anything about me?"

"…Professor Robert?"

I tilted my head at the sudden mention of Robert's name.

"Robert and I were disciples of Lord Levian together."

“…What?"

"How long I've been with that guy. If I tell him about this, he would laugh his head off."

The head wizard and Professor Robert…?

I widened my eyes at this new information.

The head wizard looked much older than Professor Robert.

His beard was bushy, and his face was lined with deep wrinkles.

"Don't worry, there are many who can vouch for me."

"Understood… But we…”

The head wizard lowered his staff and gestured to us.

"Both of you, follow me. Luna, you come too."

"Yes…!"

Luna, who had been fidgeting in the back, nodded at the head wizard's words.

"I won't disclose that you came here. But that doesn't mean I won't do anything."

The head wizard tapped the desk with his staff.

"Whether or not someone becomes the master of Astria doesn't concern me much. However, I am opposed to anyone inheriting the Astria family in its current state. I don't know what thoughts and ideologies you have, but I don't think adults would reject such a great power in front of them."

"What do you want us to do?"

At Ian's words, the head wizard smiled.

"Collaborate. To take down your father."

My eyes widened and I looked at Ian.

Ian's eyes narrowed and glared at the head wizard.

"What do you mean by collaborate?"

"Exactly as it sounds. Combine your strengths to uncover the secrets of Astria. And when everything is over, then you may compete."

"Please, be more specific."

"Ian, teach Rudy Astria spatial magic. Rudy Astria, tell those around you to fully support Ian."

"Collaborate amicably as brothers."

Thump—

"That's ridiculous."

Ian said, slamming the desk.

"What do you suggest we do if it's ridiculous? Do you want to go to jail?"

"Do you think teaching spatial magic and collaborating are equivalent?"

"There are more capable people around Rudy Astria than you think. Enough to help you win the succession battle perfectly."

"As you know, even if things continue as they are now, I am winning the succession battle. Are you saying to risk it all for this?"

"Are you worried?"

The head wizard glared at Ian while stroking his beard.

"Are you worried that Rudy Astria will learn spatial magic perfectly, and you'll fail to utilize the people around you? Are you doubting your abilities?"

“…No. It's because the value of the help from those around me and spatial magic are as different as heaven and earth."

"I think they are of similar value. Think about the people around Rudy. Astina, Rie, and even the professors at the academy helping you."

"Those people won't necessarily become mine, will they?"

"That depends on how well you do. How would they know whether to help you without seeing your abilities and character?"

Ian frowned.

"Do you think the people around Rudy will help me properly?"

"I think if Rudy just speaks up they will. Rudy Astria, what do you think?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll talk to them."

This was a no-loss deal for me.

I could learn spatial magic and stop Perrian Astria.

Ian, dissatisfied, said,

"Do you really need to teach me spatial magic? Aren't there many other ways we can collaborate?"

"That's something you'll come to know as you investigate Perrian."

The head wizard pulled out a bundle of papers from under the desk.

He pushed the bundle towards us.

"Investigating Perrian becomes much easier with spatial magic."

Turning the pages, a lot of documents related to Perrian unfolded.

Documents on how he tried to hide necromancy and related activities, and about those places.

"Perrian uses spatial magic to dig out spaces behind walls or near the mansion. He creates secret spaces without leaving any trace."

The mansion in the capital had a vault, similar to what the head wizard described.

"You can't normally discover such places. That's why spatial magic is needed."

“…Then, what does it mean for Rudy's acquaintances to help me?"

"You have a different task."

"A task?"

"Things involving political pressure and military power. I'll leave that to you."

The head wizard said this and laughed.

"I'll provide the exact details separately. Explaining here will only waste time. I'll send the documents secretly, so wait for them when you return. And Luna?"

"Yes?"

"Help me out a bit."

CHAPTER 242
PAST AND FUTURE (9)

A dark night.

I put on my hood and left the mansion.

There was not a single person on the street, and the only light came from the moon.

Chirp chirp—

In the quiet space, only the sound of insects could be heard.

There, a small cabin with lights on was visible.

It was located on the outskirts of the capital, to the extent that one might wonder if such a place even existed there.

I opened the door to the cabin and entered.

"Have you arrived?"

Inside was Ian Astria, sitting in a chair.

I had come to meet Ian to learn spatial magic.

A few days after meeting the head wizard.

I wrote letters to everyone around me, including Rie and Astina.

The content of the letters was to cooperate with Ian Astria.

I couldn't write the details, but everyone responded to my request after I sent letters saying I would explain in detail later.

"Are my friends being of any help to you?"

"The number of people nitpicking at my side has just increased, which is annoying."

Even though he said that, work was progressing smoothly.

Rie and Astina were helping, and McDowell, who was still in the capital, was also helping him.

The empire was abuzz with talk about him these days.

It was strange that people from the Emperor's faction were helping Ian all of a sudden.

"How is it going?"

"When passing through the capital, it was decided that the Royal army would inspect the luggage. It seems that other things are also progressing well."

What Ian had planned was direct pressure on Perrian.

Perrian had no choice but to stay at the mansion by the emperor's order.

To research necromancy magic, he had to move related luggage to the capital.

Ian used the excuse of blocking the passage of the rebels to have the Royal army search the luggage.

This meant that it would be impossible to bring in items related to necromancy magic through other people.

However, inspecting the luggage wouldn't prevent everything.

If Perrian tried to bring in the luggage using spatial magic, there was no way to stop him.

That's where my role was needed.

If he tried to leave the mansion using spatial magic, I would follow him using spatial magic.

I would check what Perrian was doing and what luggage he was bringing in.

If he had created a hidden place using spatial magic, I would check that place and inform others.

But for that, I first needed to learn spatial magic…

"The blocking of passage through the empire starts in a week. I barely managed to convince your friends to delay."

"Ahaha……”

I thought it must have been Rie.

Rie had the personality to start things right away once decided.

Thanks to her willingness to follow Ian's instructions, they managed to adjust the timing appropriately.

"Then, let's end our chat here, and I'll teach you spatial magic right away."

"Understood."

Then Ian used spatial magic.

A small hole appeared next to Ian, and he put his hand into that hole.

"This is the material I've compiled about spatial magic."

What came out of the hole was a document about spatial magic, written in Ian's handwriting.

I looked at the material and widened my eyes.

"Isn't it forbidden to leave records about spatial magic?"

"Then, is it acceptable to commit an act of filial impiety towards my father? After all, it's all the same if everything here is burned."

It was somewhat peculiar when Ian spoke like that.

For now, I started to skim through the material Ian had given me.

"You're not supposed to read it now. Since I can't stay here long, study it after I've left."

“…What?"

He was giving it to me to study?

"There's only a week left. You must learn to use spatial magic within a week. And you should also be able to use some small applications of it. So, I will teach you directly."

I widened my eyes.

Ian was seriously planning to teach me.

I had received some instruction from Ian before.

When he taught me the basics of spatial magic, he made it really easy to understand.

Because Ian's understanding of magic theory was exceptional, even I, who knew nothing about spatial magic, could easily learn it.

The fact that Ian was going to teach me directly meant that he intended for me to use spatial magic properly.

"Then, I will teach you how to use spatial magic."

Ian placed a blank sheet of paper in front of me.

"Seeing how you figured out time magic usage last time, it appears you can properly perceive space."

"Yes, I can."

"But you haven't been able to use spatial magic yet."

"Yes, that's correct."

Then Ian drew a small square on the paper.

After drawing the square, he started to mark small dots in it.

"Let's start then. This is the space you are perceiving. Right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

Ian drew a small circle inside the square.

"Let's consider this circle as you. Do you properly understand the reality and spatial realms?"

"Yes, events occurring in reality cannot affect the spatial realm, but events occurring in the spatial realm can affect reality. Is that correct?"

"That's right, events in reality cannot affect the spatial realm. However, it's different when permission to enter the spatial realm is granted. We, the Astria family, have been passed down the knowledge of spatial magic. Therefore, even a person existing in reality can affect the spatial realm."

Ian continued his explanation.

"But that doesn't mean you can make significant changes to the spatial realm. You can't even scratch it. This place isn't meant to be tampered with by beings from reality. Even though we can handle the spatial realm, it means there are limits."

This raised a question for me.

"Then, what about spatial severance magic? Isn't it about tearing space? How is that done?"

Ian narrowed his eyes at my question.

"I'm not explaining it now. Save your questions for the end; just listen for now."

“…Understood."

"As you said, spatial severance or teleportation might seem to us like acts of tearing or damaging space. However, spatial magic is not like that."

Ian connected the dots drawn in the square with a line.

"Now, the square appears to be divided into two."

"Yes."

Saying that, Ian began to draw lines haphazardly.

"Imagine dividing this square into dozens of pieces. Then, move these divided spaces according to the rules of space."

“…Move them?"

"Just as the empire follows its laws, in the spatial realm, we must follow the rules of the spatial realm. The rules of space are simply about moving the divided spaces like a puzzle. So, we can't use any method other than moving the spaces divided according to the rules of the spatial realm."

"Dividing and moving space…”

"Think of it as dividing a room. We are the administrators who can move these divided rooms. We change the space we are in with the space next to it, and make adjacent spaces separate. That's what spatial magic is."

Reality is divided into rooms in the spatial realm, and those rooms are moved.

Since it happens in the spatial realm, it makes possible what is impossible in reality.

There, the spaces are clearly divided like rooms, but in reality, they are invisible, so they appear to disappear and move instantly, making reality appear to be torn.

Trying to understand a realm invisible in reality felt like I could grasp it, yet it remained elusive.

"Let's continue. If you don't understand, I'll explain again later, so keep listening."

"Understood."

And so, Ian's explanation continued.

Ian's explanation was easy to understand.

I could grasp it theoretically, but the content was so complex that I couldn't apply it practically.

It's natural to find it difficult when you're trying to go into practice after listening to theoretical lectures that others would hear over several months, all at once.

Still, I had to succeed.

After practicing alone for a few minutes,

Ian tapped the desk lightly.

"I'll have to go back now. If I stay here any longer, I might get caught."

"Ah. Understood. Please go back now."

Ian began to hastily gather his things.

"I'll have some time in about three days; I'll check on your magic then."

"Understood."

The magic I needed now was teleportation.

I didn't need any other magic at the moment.

Though he said he'd have time in three days, the fact that we were meeting at such late hours made it nonsensical to talk about having a scheduled time.

He had scheduled it that way, judging that I could learn teleportation within three days.

Even though he spoke in a dismissive tone, he was treating me quite humanely.

He was being considerate in his own way, and I felt respected.

Seeing Ian like this made me curious about something.

The current situation.

Ian is trying to push Perrian out.

But, given the relationship between Ian and Perrian, could he really do that?

Perrian actively supported Ian, and Ian followed his father.

This fact hasn't changed much even now.

If Perrian hadn't trusted Ian, he wouldn't have shown him necromancy magic.

Yet, Ian is trying to act against Perrian.

To me, that man doesn't feel like a father, so that's that, but it's not the same for Ian.

Perrian treated Ian as a father, and Ian treated Perrian as such.

Could such a relationship crumble overnight?

Just because the head wizard found fault?

I couldn't understand what he was thinking.

"Then, I should be going."

Ian picked up his belongings and headed towards the door.

I watched Ian's back as he left.

"Brother."

“…What is it?"

"What do you think about pushing father out?"

“…What kind of out-of-the-blue question is that?"

“…No, it's nothing. Just a sudden question that came to mind."

Ian opened the door to the cabin with an indifferent expression.

"It's just something that needs to be done."

Ian said that and went outside.

CHAPTER 243
PAST AND FUTURE (10)

"Rudy, what do you want to do?"

"Heh, since we've also received help from the guy, we should do as he says."

McDowell said, looking at Cromwell, who was frowning.

"That's true, but… It would have been fine if Rudy had asked for help in inheriting the family, but he's asking us to help Ian."

"He must have his reasons for asking for help. He must be unable to speak because there's a special circumstance."

Originally, the academy did not interfere in politics at all.

Whether it was the principal or an ordinary professor, they never got involved in political matters.

Yet, McDowell was now exerting influence in politics.

The Royal army's inspection and search of goods and people.

McDowell had actively supported this.

Even though it was Ian's opinion, everyone around Rudy had also shown their active support.

"It looks like he's planning something, asking others for help as well."

"Hmm… Alright. I'll be heading back for now. Please take care of Rudy Astria."

"Understood."

Neither the vice-principal nor the principal of the academy could afford to be away

for a long time.

Cromwell was preparing to return to the academy.

After packing some of his belongings, Cromwell stepped outside and looked around.

"Spring is about to come."

Flower buds were starting to form on the trees, and green leaves were present.

Winter was passing, and spring was approaching.

The academy had a lot to do when spring came.

They had to prepare for the admission of new students, and before that, there was the graduation ceremony for the third-year students.

"It's going to be busy."

With that, Cromwell sighed and was about to depart for the academy.

"Cromwell."

Then, a voice was heard from behind.

“…Robert?"

As Cromwell turned around, he saw Robert wearing a hood.

"Why are you here… No, what about the necromancers?"

Robert approached with a smile.

"The necromancers have been dealt with."

"Then you should have contacted us. Or, does anyone else know?"

"No one knows. If it got out to too many, Perrian Astria might find out, so we're keeping it hidden for now."

"I see… But, why are you here… No, what have you been doing all this time?"

It had been more than a fortnight since Robert had gone to deal with the necromancers.

It shouldn't have taken that long to deal with the necromancers.

"I went to see my wife and son."

His wife and son.

That meant he had visited their graves.

"Ah…"

Cromwell did not ask further.

The fact that Robert's son had died due to necromancy was well known to Cromwell, a close friend of his.

Since the Astria territory was also near the cemetery, he accepted it and moved on.

"Will you return with me? I'm about to head to the academy."

"No, I came here because I have things to do."

"Things to do, you say?"

"More importantly, do you have a cigarette?"

Cromwell gave Robert a puzzled look upon hearing his question.

In the past, Robert was a smoker but had quit smoking after his son's death.

"I do have some."

"Then give me one."

Cromwell, tilting his head, took out a cigarette from his pocket and handed it to Robert.

"Why are you stingily giving me just one?"

Grumbling, Robert snatched the pack of cigarettes Cromwell was holding in his other hand.

"I'll borrow these."

“…What are you, some delinquent borrowing stuff?"

Cromwell clicked his tongue and put a cigarette in his mouth.

"I'm leaving now."

"What…?"

Cromwell thought Robert wanted to smoke together by asking for the cigarette, but Robert had already started walking away.

"See you at the academy. Buy me a drink if you do."

Cromwell watched Robert walking away with a look of disbelief.

"Tsk. Heartless."

Cromwell muttered to himself and lit the cigarette, then just watched the rising smoke.

"Why isn't this working?"

I had been continuously using magic, considering the theory of spatial magic that Ian had mentioned.

Yet, it wasn't working properly.

Theory is theory, and practice is practice.

Even if I had grasped the theory to some extent, it was not easy to use it successfully.

"Still, it's better than when I first learned dark magic."

I don't even want to think about when I first learned dark magic.

Back then, I suffered from all kinds of curses.

Compared to that, spatial magic was relatively better.

Even if I failed, I wasn't cursed or in pain.

The problem was the time constraint.

I was given a week.

Now, only four days are left.

Three days have passed, but there has been no significant progress.

I've never felt this stuck before.

In reality, I've been studying spatial magic for over two months, not just the three days since I learned from Ian.

Though many things have happened in the meantime, that's just an excuse.

Most of the events only lasted a day or two while I was studying.

So, it wasn't like I didn't have time.

I spent most of my time learning spatial magic and put in the effort.

Feeling this powerless made me think of one thing.

'Talent.'

I had never thought about talent before.

I overcame everything with effort.

That doesn't mean I thought I had no talent.

I must have had talent to have come this far.

But now, I'm facing a huge wall.

I don't deny the existence of talent.

Surely, factors like the environment one grows up in create differences between people.

In my previous life, I gave up on many things because of this.

I was someone without talent.

I was someone who couldn't make it work.

However, coming to this world changed that mindset.

Effort can overcome the lack of talent.

Once you start blaming talent, there's no more growth.

That's what I thought.

Looking back now, I wonder if I said such things because I had talent.

I made an effort because I had talent, and I could say such things because I had talent.

And now, it seemed like I had hit a wall of talent.

There seemed to be a limit to my talent, and I wondered if this was it.

Of course, in the future I saw, I was using spatial magic.

If you ask whether the future me is completely the same as the current me, I couldn't answer.

There were similarities, but the me from that world and the current me are clearly different people.

I had no idea what environments the future me had gone through or how I had lived.

"Young master Rudy Astria."

As I was sighing, a maid came down to the study.

"A man named Robert is looking for you, Lord Rudy."

“…Professor Robert?"

My eyes widened.

There was no reason for Robert to be in the capital.

I quickly ran to the front of the mansion.

"Professor?"

"It's been a while, Rudy."

Indeed, Robert was in front of the mansion.

"What brings you here… At this time?"

It was already almost dusk.

Dinner time had passed, and it was the time when early sleepers would have already gone to bed.

Robert pointed towards the mansion and smiled as he spoke.

"If you're not going to keep standing here, shall we go inside?"

With a bewildered expression, I nodded.

"Ah, yes… Please come in."

I led Robert into the mansion and guided him to the study.

"Doesn't this mansion have a reception room? Why lead me through such a mess?"

"I thought you usually don't care about such things… I led you here because my father is in the mansion."

I checked to make sure no one was around and quietly said to Robert.

"You and the necromancers have a bad history, don't you?"

I had led him to the study because it wouldn't be good if the professor and my father faced each other.

"More importantly, did 'that matter' go well?"

'That matter' referred to the necromancers in the Astria territory.

I had written a letter to Professor Robert.

Even if I hadn't written it, Professor Robert would have known it was the best opportunity to catch the necromancers.

Robert touched his ear as if my question was bothersome.

"Never mind that. How's your magic study going these days?"

Never mind that…

Though I was very curious about it, I answered the question he asked.

"Just so-so. I'm in a slump… or maybe I've hit a wall of talent…"

"A wall of talent? Pfft."

Robert burst out laughing after saying that.

"Why are you laughing…"

"What wall of talent. What nonsensical talk."

"Have you never felt such a wall, Professor Robert?"

"Of course, I have. No, many times. I've lived many more years than you, so naturally,

I've felt it."

"Then why laugh?"

"Because it's not a wall of talent."

I narrowed my eyes and glared at Robert.

"Then what is it?"

"It's just a process. The process of everything. Haven't you experienced such things often? Before you learned dark magic from me and even after that."

Before learning dark magic from Robert…

Certainly, it was a grinding experience.

I had kept trying dark magic to pass the tests Robert set.

Back then, it was essential for survival, so I really did it as if it was a matter of life and death.

"But isn't it different now compared to then?"

"How so?"

"That was when learning basic dark magic, and now it's…"

Spatial magic.

Spatial magic, which is really used by only a few people.

I might not have the talent for it.

"Do you know how much talent you have?"

"…I don't know."

"Then what's the problem?"

“…What?"

"Just do it. If you're not going to quit, just do it."

"But…”

"You don't know how much talent you have. No one does, really. So are you going to quit? Give up? No, you're not. If you're going to continue, then stop digging yourself into a hole and just do it. If you still fail, then think about why. Was it because of lack of time, lack of effort, or really a lack of talent?"

Robert said that and then tapped my forehead.

"Think later. Now is the time to focus on what you have to do."

With that, Robert stood up.

“…Professor?"

"You have an appointment, right?"

My eyes widened at his words.

Looking at the time, it was nearly time to go to the cabin to meet Ian.

"How did you know?"

"I can roughly tell. Now, I'm off."

"There's still time. How about a cup of tea…”

"What tea? When have I ever been one to sit and drink tea."

Robert snorted and walked out.

"Huh…”

I wore a baffled expression at his sudden visit and just as sudden departure.

He had always been like that, but seeing him after a long time brought a fresh sense

of nostalgia.

Still, a smile formed on my lips.

It felt like I had found the direction I had lost.

"Take care, Master."

I bid farewell to Robert's departing figure.

Robert walked out, only raising his hand without turning back.

CHAPTER 244
PAST AND FUTURE (11)

"Come on, come on! You can line up here! Don't push!"

It was the line to enter the capital of the Empire.

A checkpoint had been established to enter the capital.

"That person…"

"Oh, if it's a man with blonde hair, isn't that him?"

There was someone who attracted the attention of the people in the long line.

Ian Astria.

The commander of the Royal Army stood prominently where the gatekeepers were.

With him standing in front of the city gate, the soldiers were also tense and disciplined, and the people entering opened their luggage without complaints.

This was exactly what Ian had intended.

If discipline was lax from the beginning, the outcome would be predictable without even looking.

Luggage checks were not being conducted properly, and if one was a noble, their luggage wouldn't even be opened.

Therefore, it was necessary to properly implement checks from the start to maintain discipline.

Ian stood there quietly, watching people enter.

"The operation is going well, but…"

Ian watched the line while thinking something else.

"I wonder what happened to Rudy."

Ian had not heard from Rudy since meeting him four days ago.

Rudy was unable to use spatial magic just four days ago.

He understood the basic theory but had difficulty implementing it.

Ian had many thoughts upon seeing this.

He wondered if it was too much to ask to use spatial magic within a week.

Even for Ian, it had taken more than a month to learn properly.

Nevertheless, there was no time to relax.

The head wizard had said that there wasn't much time left.

The leeway made for Rudy was a week, considering the circumstances.

"If Rudy can't handle spatial magic, do we need to prepare another method?"

The operation had already begun.

Blocking the passage to the capital was just the beginning, and the subsequent actions were already underway.

Rudy's help was essential to properly carry out the rest of the operations.

If Rudy couldn't provide proper assistance, the strategy would need to be slightly adjusted.

"Did I gamble too much?"

Pushing aside his father.

Ian had many doubts about this action itself.

To Ian, his father was the strongest and most magnificent.

Father, always dignified as a Duke of the Empire.

Yet, he had taken a stand against him because he judged that his father was no longer the same.

The spark inside his father's eyes had already disappeared.

His eyes were filled only with desire.

Ian didn't necessarily think that desire was bad.

Desire makes people grow and reach higher places.

However, his father had gone off track somewhere.

No matter how much he respected and followed him, the actions his father intended to take had to be stopped.

"Commander."

At that moment, a woman approached Ian's side.

A woman wearing a red uniform.

The woman was Astina.

"Now, I'll take over from here. Why don't you go and have a meal? We've prepared food in the barracks."

“…Understood. Thank you."

"Also, there's a message from Rie. She says things are going well."

"Things, huh…”

Ian's expression was subtle.

"Is there a problem?"

"It's about Rudy Astria. The issue is with him."

Then Astina spoke calmly.

"Then there shouldn't be a problem."

“…How do you know?"

"I know him well. I've had many of the same concerns as you, Commander. But, I often realize those worries are needless and feel foolish afterward. So, we just need to do what we have to do."

Ian furrowed his brow at Astina's words.

"Hmm… That's excessive trust."

"Because he has never betrayed such trust."

"Alright, I understand. I'll be going back."

Ian moved on.

Although Astina had such faith, Ian intended to prepare for the possibility of Rudy's failure.

With that, he went to the barracks for a meal.

"Good work!"

"Yes."

Ian passed the soldier guarding the front of the barracks and entered.

Inside, a meal was prepared, and there was a letter on top of it.

Ian picked up the letter puzzledly.

“…Hmm?"

Ian looked at the letter and then went outside.

"Is there a problem?"

"Did anyone come in?"

"Only the maids who prepared the meal, no one else. Is there something wrong?"

“…No."

Ian went back inside the barracks and stared intently at the letter.

"What's this?"

Ian immediately opened the letter.

The letter contained precisely one sentence.

[This is Rudy Astria. Enjoy your meal.]

"This is troublesome."

Perrian stroked his chin as he looked out the window.

Outside the window, the street was quieter than usual.

"Blocking the rebels' entry… The rebel scoundrels are making things difficult."

Perrian was bringing various materials into the capital.

Magic activated by mana stones created through summoning magic.

The documents he had been dealing with at the mansion were related to that.

All the documents were related to creating magic.

They were sent by necromancers and wizards outside the capital.

"Almost finished. Installing the magic shouldn't be a problem, but bringing in the magical tools will be."

Right now, in front of the capital, soldiers were not only checking luggage, but Ian and Astina were also there.

Both were exceptional wizards.

When bringing in magical tools, they would surely sense something was off.

Although they couldn't always be there as the commander and deputy commander of the Royal Army, caution was still needed.

"Should I ask Ian to do it?"

But that was problematic because there were too many eyes around Ian.

Now Ian had become too prominent a figure to be used carelessly.

Then, there was only one conclusion.

"I must go there myself."

Perrian gathered mana.

He hadn't used spatial magic much recently, so his skills had become a bit rusty.

Still, it wasn't to the point where he couldn't use it.

"Teleport."

As Perrian uttered the activation word, his view changed.

He arrived in a small room.

Perrian opened the door of the room and stepped out.

“…Perrian?"

As he came out of the room, he saw about a dozen wizards.

The place Perrian had arrived at was a workshop where wizards gathered.

A small workshop outside the capital.

It looked ordinary from the outside, but this place was a workshop where research was conducted using mana stones provided by Perrian.

"Is everything proceeding normally?"

As he asked, a person who looked like a high-ranking wizard ran over from a distance.

"Yes! Perrian, we are proceeding as ordered."

"How far has it progressed?"

"It's almost at the finishing stage. But regarding entering and exiting the capital…"

"I won't take any more reports on that. Since it's in the final stage, you can handle it yourselves."

"We can manage to a certain extent, but for things like the final magic circle…"

"I'll take care of that myself. Just do what you can."

"Understood."

Perrian looked around.

"How long do you think it will take?"

"A week… No, if we hurry, it might be possible within four days."

"Good, I'll trust and leave it to you."

Perrian was about to leave after receiving the report.

That's when the high-ranking wizard grabbed him.

"Perrian. There's something strange."

"Strange?"

"The ones providing the mana stones have been acting oddly lately."

“…Mana stones?"

Perrian narrowed his brows.

If it was about those supplying mana stones, he meant the necromancers.

Perrian hadn't noticed anything unusual in the reports the necromancers submitted to him.

After all, their reports were merely about how many people they had kidnapped and how many mana stones they had produced.

"The supply of mana stones is decreasing. And yesterday, we didn't receive any mana stones at all."

"Mana stones? I was told in the report that they were supplied?"

"No, we didn't receive any at all. We don't even know where they are, so we were just waiting."

“…What are they doing? Did they plan an escape because I'm not there?"

Perrian became annoyed.

"I'll take care of that part myself. For now, just do the tasks assigned to you."

"Understood."

The necromancers were acting strange…

'Thinking of joining the rebels?'

The only place that would take in necromancers was the rebels.

Only a family like the Astria could hide necromancers, as other families wouldn't even attempt to contact them.

'I'll have to check.'

"This is the final document. It's not much different, but there are some modifications, so it would be helpful if you read it."

"Alright."

Perrian took the documents handed over by the high-ranking wizard and manipulated mana.

"Teleport."

And then, Perrian disappeared.

"Now, did everyone hear that? We have four days left. Can we complete it by then?"

"Understood…"

The surrounding wizards spoke in a lifeless voice.

They had all been pulling all-nighters, enduring for over two weeks.

They were pushing forward with the work as fast as possible, under Perrian's orders.

'Ugh… My eyes hurt… '

'It feels like I can't even produce mana properly anymore… '

While the wizards were internally voicing their complaints.

Thud—

The sound of footsteps echoed.

That room was Perrian's private room.

It was the room Perrian used to come here through spatial magic.

"…Did you forget something?"

The high-ranking wizard, who had been responding to Perrian, tilted his head and looked towards the room.

Then.

Boom!

A huge explosion occurred near the room.

Most of the wizards couldn't react to the explosion and were swept away by it, falling to the ground.

However, the high-ranking wizard barely managed to use magic to block the explosion.

"What… What is this?"

The high-ranking wizard looked bewildered.

Then, a voice was heard.

"Everyone, stop moving."

It was a voice they hadn't heard before.

"If you move even slightly, whether it's your mana or your body, know that you will die."

As the smoke from the explosion cleared, the figure of a man appeared.

He had the same hair color as Perrian but looked much younger.

He wore gloves with mana stones embedded in them and was accompanied by a silver-colored wolf.

It was Rudy Astria.

CHAPTER 245
PAST AND FUTURE (12)

It had been a hellish week.

I hadn't been able to sleep properly, skipped meals, and devoted myself to studying.

I don't think I have ever studied this hard before.

I did my best, just as Robert had advised.

And so, a week passed.

I succeeded in using spatial magic.

No, to be precise, I was able to use spatial magic on the 6th day.

On the 7th day, I used the technique that Ian had explained to me.

The technique Ian taught me was coordinate analysis.

It was a technique to find out where Perrian went when he used spatial magic.

I went through hell to use these two techniques, spatial teleportation and coordinate analysis.

It was a week I never wanted to experience again.

Still, the reward for this came quickly.

A wizard was tied up and collapsed next to me, and another wizard was kneeling and glaring at me.

And around me, magical research materials were scattered everywhere.

I asked while reading the messed-up research materials.

"So, what were you doing here?"

"You think I'd tell you?"

Most of the wizards had fallen at the first attack, but this wizard had resisted until the end.

Of course, I could easily defeat this wizard too.

For some reason, he had fallen without being able to use magic properly.

The magic he used was high-level.

However, the application of mana was a mess, and he had collapsed on his own before he could cast a spell.

It felt like he was already out of energy before I even faced him.

"Hmm…"

I read through the documents that had fallen to the floor, one by one.

I can't draw magic circles myself, but I had spent a long time beside Luna, who was good with them.

I've only been by Luna's side for two years, but those two years were enough for me.

After reading some of the documents, I looked at the wizard in front of me.

"You guys don't know anything?"

"What?"

I smiled broadly.

"You were just making it as told, without knowing what this magic tool would become."

That was the conclusion I drew after reading the documents.

"Do you know what this magic tool is used for?"

I pointed to the magic tool in front of me.

A magic tool as big as a person.

But this magic tool was really useless.

Not figuratively, but this tool was literally useless.

Since the wizard didn't answer, I spoke instead.

"That's an amplifier."

A magic tool amplifier.

The main magic circle hadn't been inserted into it yet.

This tool would only activate when a central magic circle is inserted into it.

Until then, it had been just a large piece of scrap metal.

"So, you must not have connected the middle circuit properly."

I showed the document I was holding to the wizard.

The document was a part of the blueprint for the central part.

The circuits on the side, excluding the central part, were perfect.

The mana stone's efficiency part was well constructed, and the circuit that amplified it was perfect.

However, there was no circuit leading to the center.

Surely, there should have been a main magic circle in the middle part, but even the circuit connecting to that part was completely empty.

That meant they had no idea what was supposed to go in the middle.

Of course, it could be that I was misunderstanding something just by looking at this document.

Still, the reason I had asked was to probe him.

"Ugh…"

The wizard in front of me frowned.

True to being a research wizard, he couldn't lie.

"Looks like I'm right."

I picked up a few documents and stood up.

These guys didn't know what Perrian was planning to do.

Then, there was no more reason to stay.

"So, shall we all go together?"

"…What?"

"To prison, where else?"

I smiled broadly.

"…What happened here?"

Perrian arrived at the Astria territory with a dumbfounded expression.

The place where the necromancers had gathered was in total disarray.

The number of wizards had drastically decreased, and all related documents had disappeared.

Moreover, while there were still necromancers present, they were not the ones who had held significant positions.

Only the insignificant ones remained.

"I'm sorry…"

"I asked what happened."

"…Professor Robert came."

"Robert? Why would he suddenly?"

Perrian naturally thought it was the work of the Emperor's faction or the rebels.

It made sense for the Emperor's faction to interfere with his work, and for the rebels, taking necromancers away would be a significant gain.

But the sudden mention of Robert's name was puzzling.

"He had been investigating the necromancers for a while."

"Why would he do that?"

"Remember the incident that happened with necromancy before? When Ephomos fell…"

"Ah, that incident?"

The incident where Robert's son died because of necromancy.

It was an event Perrian had considered insignificant, so he had dismissed it from his mind.

"Did he come for revenge?"

"It seems so."

"And you were defeated by such a person?"

"…"

"Pathetic and hopeless."

Perrian clicked his tongue and stroked his chin.

If it was the Academy, then they were closer to the Emperor's faction at the moment.

People like McDowell and Cromwell were close to Chancellor Ophillius, and despite the Academy's neutral stance, it ultimately followed the Emperor's will.

"Maybe he didn't come just for revenge."

Perrian looked around.

If he had come purely for revenge, there would be no reason to leave this place like this.

Leaving even a little bit meant it was to deceive him.

"So, you guys sent the letter."

"Yes… otherwise, he said he would kill us…"

Perrian stared at the wizard in front of him and extended his hand.

"Spatial Severance."

"…Huh?"

A gap in space appeared around the wizard's neck.

The necromancer reporting to Perrian was immediately decapitated, his head severed from his body.

"Ugh…"

"Huh…"

Blood spurted from the neck like a fountain.

The necromancers around widened their eyes and stared at the scene.

"Make the mana stones again."

When Perrian said that, the wizards murmured among themselves.

Then they quietly spoke up.

"We don't have the manpower to capture people anymore… and all the documents have disappeared…"

"Do you want to die too?"

"…Sigh."

"Pathetic creatures."

Perrian said that and turned his head.

He was looking towards where the vault had been.

Originally, it was a place where mana stones, filled with vast amounts of mana, were stored.

The vault had been emptied.

'That was a close call.'

However, there wasn't anything important inside.

Perrian had never trusted the necromancers from the beginning.

He had taken the mana stones with the most mana when he went to the capital.

'It was almost complete.'

The death of the necromancers was not a big issue, but the biggest problem was that this place had been exposed.

There hadn't been any reactions from the surroundings yet, but it would probably happen soon.

'Robert came here about 2 weeks ago.'

That meant there was still time.

Perrian had not been caught at the scene.

The only evidence was that necromancers existed in the Astria territory and the testimonies of the necromancers.

That meant a lengthy process would follow.

Capturing a duke of a country was not that easy.

'Ian will probably drag out the time.'

Ian already knew about this matter.

So, he thought that Ian would handle it calmly.

Moreover, if the necromancers started moving again, the public's attention would be drawn to the necromancers.

It would take some time to stop them.

Anyway, since the capable necromancers were dead, there was no use for them.

So, he planned to use them as bait and then discard them.

'I don't have time to be doing this.'

Completing the magic tool would take a week, but he planned to finish it in four days.

Even if various things delayed it, the fact that time was running out did not change.

"Then, I'll be going back."

Perrian said that and returned to the capital.

The necromancers looked at each other at the spot where Perrian had disappeared.

"What should we do?"

“…We don't have any other way to live, do we?"

Following Perrian's orders wouldn't guarantee survival.

If they did so, Robert would surely kill them all.

And if they didn't take any action, Perrian wouldn't just let them be.

"It's time for us to face the consequences of our actions."

They nodded in agreement, sharing the same thought.

Ian stood quietly, waiting for someone, and frowned when he saw a woman approaching him.

“…Why did you come?"

"Do you have a problem with that?"

Rie brushed her golden wavy hair aside and smiled brightly.

"Wasn't there anyone else?"

"There were others, but none as trustworthy. At least one of the two of us should be someone reliable, don’t you think?"

"This is absurd."

Ian turned his head away from Rie and walked forward.

Rie followed him.

The same armbands were worn on the arms of both as they walked.

These armbands bore the symbol of the royal family, a golden dragon, and a sword with ornate patterns.

It signified that they were special investigators appointed by the royal family.

"I hoped that someone competent would come."

"I'll manage fine on my own, so you better do your part properly."

They stopped walking, each annoyed with the other.

In front of them was the Astria family's mansion.

CHAPTER 246
PAST AND FUTURE (13)

“……What the hell is this, Ian?"

"I've come as a special investigator of the Empire. Perrian Astria, I am arresting you on charges of using necromancy and for treason."

Ian handed Perrian some documents.

The contents of the documents were the same as what Ian had stated.

The Emperor's seal and signatures from various nobles were on them.

It meant that the content had already been approved in a meeting.

Perrian's eyes widened as he looked at the document.

It would have taken a lot of time for such a document to be issued.

The noble faction and the Emperor's faction had to negotiate to come to such a conclusion.

Many procedures were required before such a document could be approved.

It was a speed that Perrian's mind could not understand.

Of course, the reason it could be issued so quickly was due to many things that had been accumulated over time.

Luna and the head wizard personally organized the documents and handed them over to Ian and Rie, and Ian and Rie had talked in advance before the meeting took place.

When the leaders of the Emperor's faction and the noble faction presented the same opinion at the meeting, the nobles below them just followed their will.

Thus, when the intentions of the Emperor's faction and the noble faction were united, the process was expedited.

There were no delays, and the documents were processed quickly, proceeding through all the procedures at an unbelievable speed.

Perrian could not have predicted such an abnormal situation.

"Damn it… Ian Astria!!!"

Perrian yelled at Ian, his veins bulging.

Ian calmly extended the handcuffs to Perrian.

"I am here as a special investigator now. Please behave accordingly."

"Do you think you'll succeed as the head of the family by doing this? Do you know what will happen if I speak to the other nobles?"

"Father is a suspect now. No one in the Empire would listen to such a person."

Ian answered firmly.

Perrian scoffed at him.

"You think you can survive politically by siding with those of the Emperor's faction? You're just going to end up as a dog chasing chickens, discarded by them…"

Click—

"Now, criminal, please keep your mouth shut. Shall we proceed with the investigation? Or are you going to keep chatting?"

Rie handcuffed Perrian in front of her with a smile.

"Ha… Princess, do you think I'll end like this? Do you think this will just pass quietly? You've made a mistake."

"Yes, yes. Let's continue this conversation in jail."

Rie dragged Perrian away.

Ian licked his lips as he watched Perrian's back.

Rudy approached from behind.

As they had come to search the Astria residence, Rudy was also there.

"Isn't this more or less over now?"

"No, if it was over, we would have finished it long ago. The problem starts now."

"From now?"

Rudy tilted his head in confusion.

"We've caught the necromancers and the wizards who were making magical tools. What more could there be?"

"That's the problem, not knowing what else there is."

"Huh……”

Rudy made a complicated expression.

"He's someone who doesn't trust anyone. Cutting off his surroundings means nothing. It's not over unless you uproot everything."

"Hmm……”

Rudy thought that the man himself might be the root, but since Ian knew more about him, Rudy just nodded.

"What will you do now?"

"We need to search for documents and such in the mansion. But……”

Ian pointed ahead.

"Why is it like this?"

“……Did father smash it in a fit of anger? Does he smash walls or something when he suddenly gets angry?"

The place Ian was pointing at was a safe in the study.

The wall was smashed.

It was a wall that Rudy had smashed.

It had been mostly repaired, but traces of it still remained.

"Smashing walls, huh…… Tsk."

Rudy clicked his tongue and pretended as if nothing had happened.

Royal Palace, Conference Room.

"Ian Astria, Rie. Have you returned?"

In front of Ian and Rie was the Emperor.

The meeting consisted of the Emperor, the Chancellor, and a few high-ranking officials of the empire.

"Yes, we have collected all the documents and evidence hidden in the mansion."

"Good, you've done well. Ian Astria, I really appreciate you taking the initiative to proceed with the work, even though the opponent was your father."

"It's nothing."

"So, what about the documents that were found?"

"There was no precise evidence. Most of the letters were vague, and there was absolutely no documentation linking necromancy to the Astria family."

“……You mean there was none?"

The Emperor widened his eyes at Ian's report and looked at Rie.

"That's correct."

"Then, doesn't that mean Perrian is innocent?"

"For now, we have a letter sent directly by the necromancers yesterday. It's a letter that details their crimes and Perrian's involvement."

"But that hardly seems like conclusive evidence."

"Yes, but we still have a reason to hold him. More importantly, it's not about finding decisive evidence right now. We need to take away the weapon that Perrian possesses."

"Weapon?"

Ian had seen the weapon that Perrian possessed.

"The mana stones created by the necromancers. We need to collect the one that contains the most powerful mana."

Finding that mana stone was the most crucial task.

It was a weapon that could potentially blow up the capital itself and was at the center of the plots Perrian had been scheming.

"So how do you plan to find this mana stone? We've searched the mansion and the places where the necromancers were, but it hasn't turned up."

To this, Ian responded.

"Spatial magic."

“……Spatial magic?"

"Important documents are likely stored in a separate space created with spatial magic."

"A separate space…… So, can you open this space?"

"That's impossible."

"Then what will you do?"

"I can't open it now, but……”

Ian lifted the corners of his mouth.

"If the person who created that separate space opens it, it's a different story."

The Empire's underground prison.

'Ian… you betrayed me?'

Perrian was grinding his teeth there.

'All of you will kneel before me. Everyone.'

There was a reason Perrian was caught so easily.

When Rie and Ian came to capture him, Perrian could have resisted.

He could have escaped using spatial magic or other spells.

However, he stayed still because he could still proceed with his plans even while being captured here.

Rather than resisting and getting injured, it was better to be caught quietly and buy time.

"Ugh!"

Then, someone collapsed and entered the prison in front of Perrian.

This person was a high-ranking wizard under Perrian's command, who had been making the amplifier.

“……Why are you here?"

"Pe, Perrian sir?"

The high-ranking wizard, locked in the cell opposite Perrian, widened his eyes.

"I asked why you are here."

"So, sorry. Right after you were taken, some guy attacked us."

"Which guy?"

"That……. someone with the same blond hair as you, sir. Right after you were taken, he suddenly appeared……."

'Right after I was taken?'

"Tell me in detail."

"After you were taken, there was a noise from the room you used to use. I thought you had come back, but then another guy suddenly appeared."

That meant he used spatial magic.

Perrian narrowed his brows.

Spatial magic and blond hair.

'Ian Astria……. '

Was he watching all along?

It was unpredictable when exactly he had planned to betray.

Moreover, Ian was supposed to be at the capital's entrance, how did he follow with spatial magic?

Perrian had too many questions.

Before resolving these questions, looking at the high-ranking wizard's face, he suddenly looked shocked.

"Then……. where did the amplifier go? If you are here, then the amplifier is……?"

"……It was taken by them."

"……What? Then where is it now?"

"I know it was brought here, but……. I don't know exactly where."

"Brought here?"

This place was the Empire's underground prison.

The amplifier was brought here…….

Is it here as evidence?

If it's them, they would've already realized it's an amplifier.

Having shown Ian the mana stone created with necromancy, he probably guessed their intention.

The strange thing is that they haven't destroyed the amplifier even now.

They should have destroyed the amplifier as soon as they found it.

"Hmm……"

Perrian stroked his chin.

The amplifier contained a lot.

It was an amplifier deeply imbued with the essence of magical tools.

With the magical tools he had created, ruling the empire was not just a dream.

Was Ian getting greedy?

That was the most likely guess.

'Then, Ian must be looking for the mana stone……. '

But even if he searches, he will never find it.

Ian won't be able to.

'If the amplifier is here……. I need to create an opportunity. And then, get the amplifier back.'

If it weren't for Ian, escaping from here would be easy.

None of the others would be able to follow with spatial magic.

Perrian stared intently at the high-ranking wizard in front of him.

"Do, do you need something?"

"Hmm……. I can use you."

“…….Me?"

Perrian fiddled with his handcuffs a few times and then stretched his hand towards the high-ranking wizard in front of him.

"Dying for me should be considered an honor."

"Wh, what do you mean……”

Perrian extended his hand and smiled.

CHAPTER 247
PAST AND FUTURE (14)

"Do you want me to use magic?"

"Do you know about these handcuffs?"

Ian showed me the handcuffs.

"Ah, aren't those handcuffs that control magic? I read the paper published by Luna recently."

"Luna? Ah, the one who recently joined the Magic Tower, right?"

"Yes, they add interference when using magic, making it impossible to use."

"That paper hasn't been out long, right? It's unlikely that it's already being used. The new handcuffs made are supposed to address the issues present in these handcuffs."

“…Yes?"

"Originally, these handcuffs play a role in disturbing mana. They shake the mana inside wizards, making it impossible to use magic."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"No, it's different. The handcuffs made by Luna are magical tools that completely prevent the use of magic. However, the existing handcuffs are magical tools that prevent the use of mana."

"But don't you need to use mana to use magic?"

"That's not entirely wrong, but you know the exception, don't you?"

The exception…

A way to use magic without using mana.

“…Necromancy?"

"Yes. Necromancy. It allows you to use magic at the cost of your own life force. Making mana stones from human life is an example of that."

"But why bring that up all of a sudden?"

"It's closely related. Can't you use necromancy?"

“…Then."

"There's opening thanks to these handcuffs. An opening to use necromancy."

Kugung—

"What's happening?"

The soldiers fell into a state of confusion.

This was clearly the Empire's underground prison.

A place where the most heinous criminals of the Empire were gathered, maintained with strict security.

Something odd was noticed in such a place.

The ground shook violently.

"Everyone, to your posts! The criminals must not be released under any circumstances!"

With Duke Perrian captured, everyone was focused on the underground prison.

They must not show any slack.

'It really happened, didn't it?'

The warden of the prison, who was in charge of the overall operations of the underground jail, looked around.

Perrian had been put in jail, and Ian had sought out the warden.

'It's supposed to be like this… '

The warden shouted to the guards around him.

"Everyone, don't panic! Just do as we prepared! Quickly escape!"

"Ah, understood!"

The warden began to lead the other guards.

"Head guard! Immediately request assistance from the Royal Army and notify the royal family."

Since it was unclear who had caused this incident, it was necessary to inform the Royal Army, the largest military force of the current Empire.

Even if it was a rebellion, the Royal Army was needed.

Since the Royal Army wasn't far from the capital, they would arrive quickly.

"Understood."

"Where is the deputy warden?"

"The deputy warden has not come out yet! He is believed to be in the special prison area!"

"Special prison?"

That was where Perrian was imprisoned.

The deputy warden was located in the place dedicated to managing only the wizards among the criminals.

"Some guards went to rescue the deputy warden…"

As the warden tried to speak, the vibrations grew stronger.

And the ceiling of the underground prison began to tilt more and more.

"Ugh…"

The warden frowned and looked towards the underground prison.

Kugugung!

"Let's escape for now! It's going to collapse like this!"

As the warden shouted, the other guards also moved quickly.

"Everyone, escape! Don't worry about the prisoners! Save yourselves first!"

If the underground prison collapsed, they would have to worry about the prisoners escaping, but the guards' survival was the top priority.

Being underground, there would be no chance of survival if the building collapsed.

Even if the prisoners died, the guards had to escape.

"Save us too!"

"You despicable bastards!!!!"

As the guards escaped, the trapped prisoners screamed.

The ceiling continued to collapse due to the large vibrations.

"Save… Huh?"

"Hey, look! This is bent!"

As the ceiling collapsed, the prison bars began to bend.

"This is our chance! Escape!"

"Quickly!!"

The prisoners squeezed their bodies through the bent bars.

The prisoners who barely escaped were busy getting out while the rest were still struggling to do so.

"Hahaha! Freedom! Freedom!"

"Let us out too!!"

The underground prison turned into a chaotic mess with screams and cheers mixing together.

As the prisoners tried to escape from the prison, one of them pointed towards the back.

“…What is that?"

"A monster?"

A monstrous creature, larger than a human, was behind them.

It resembled a human but had torn muscles and flesh in a horrifying appearance.

"Run away!!"

The monster ran towards the escaping prisoners.

"Aaaah!"

The monster caught one person and began to tear their flesh to eat.

The prisoners who had come out shouting for freedom were killed by the monster.

Fortunately, there was only one monster.

It wasn't a situation where everyone would die since there was only one monster.

The prisoners who were initially in despair regained their composure.

"Let's escape! Leave those guys behind!!"

While the upper floors were facing this chaotic situation.

"What on earth is happening?"

The deputy warden was in the special prison.

It was the special prison where the biggest vibration occurred.

The ceiling collapsed severely, and the deputy warden was barely keeping himself safe under the desk.

Just as he was unable to grasp the situation, the sound of his door opening was heard.

"Is the deputy warden there! Deputy warden!"

A voice was heard.

The deputy warden poked his head out from under the desk towards the door.

In front of the door stood Perrian Astria.

"Deputy warden! There you are!"

Perrian quickly ran towards him.

"Unlock these handcuffs immediately."

"What? What are you talking about?"

The deputy warden swallowed his saliva upon seeing Perrian.

Just a few days ago, he was sitting as a duke, but now he was a criminal.

He was a dangerous individual worthy of being locked in the underground prison, so the deputy warden looked at him apprehensively.

"Right now, a strange monster is rampaging outside. Hurry and unlock this."

"I can't do that…! More importantly, where did this monster come from…?"

"A wizard could have implanted a tool into their body. Even if these handcuffs block the body's mana, they might would not control the mana from an implanted magical tool."

"So, are you saying a wizard turned into that monster?"

"I'm not sure of the reason myself. More importantly, unlock these handcuffs quickly! Otherwise, all the criminals in the underground prison might escape!"

The deputy warden looked at Perrian with suspicious eyes.

Should he trust this man?

"Don't look at me with those eyes. I've lived my life as a Duke. I've been loyal to the Empire. Even though I'm imprisoned due to some misunderstanding, my loyalty to the Empire remains."

Perrian spoke as if he was pouring out his frustrations.

"If we leave it like this…!"

"Ah, alright. I'll unlock it."

According to Perrian, if the people in the special prison were released, the Empire would fall into great chaos.

Among those who used magic to commit crimes, the individuals locked in the special prison were tremendously vicious criminals.

The deputy warden reached out to Perrian's handcuffs.

Click.

The deputy warden moved mana, and Perrian's handcuffs were unlocked.

"Duke, I entrust this to you."

The deputy warden unlocked Perrian's handcuffs and looked into his eyes.

Perrian's eyes had grown cold.

They shined differently than when he first entered the room.

“…Duke?"

"Deputy warden, thanks for unlocking me. But."

Perrian straightened his body that had been bent over and extended his hand towards him.

"Where is the amplifier?"

A sharp smile appeared on Perrian's lips.

"If we were just a bit later, it would have been a disaster."

Perrian looked at the amplifier in front of him with a smile.

He approached the amplifier and swept off the dirt that had fallen on it.

"It could have been broken."

In his arms was the deputy warden, looking no different from a corpse.

He couldn't move a single finger, covered in blood.

"Leaving such precious equipment in a place like this. Those uncultured fools."

Perrian raised his hand and used spatial magic.

He cleared the stones that had fallen on the amplifier with spatial magic.

"They don't even know how precious this equipment is. It's something I spent years creating. Tsk."

Perrian clicked his tongue as he checked the condition of the amplifier.

Although it was good that he escaped using necromancy, the amplifier was in bad condition due to the stones that fell from the ceiling.

"I'll have to take it for repairs."

Perrian opened a subspace with spatial magic.

The subspace was a small hole, but it swallowed the large amplifier.

"Deputy warden, thank you for your guidance."

Perrian smiled at the deputy warden lying on the floor.

Then, he used spatial magic again to hide his presence.

"Well then."

Perrian used spatial magic to head to a laboratory near the Astria family's territory.

It was a laboratory he hadn't used much recently, but since it was where he first created the amplifier, it had the equipment needed for repairs.

Perrian opened the subspace again, intending to take out the amplifier.

"…?"

He tried to use spatial magic to retrieve the amplifier, but nothing appeared before him.

Only a black hole opened, without any response.

"Did I use too much mana?"

He had used mana to escape from the underground prison and to travel to the Astria territory, so he did use a lot of mana.

But it shouldn't have been enough to prevent him from opening the subspace.

Perrian furrowed his brows and stared at the open black hole.

The very presence of the black hole meant that the subspace was open.

However, no object was coming out of it.

Perrian tried to take out other objects from the subspace as well.

Still, there was no response.

Perrian swept his hair back, annoyed by the situation not going his way.

And he looked into the subspace.

"What?"

There was nothing inside the subspace.

Not the amplifier.

Not the stacked documents.

Nothing at all.

CHAPTER 248
PAST AND FUTURE (15)

Everything went according to plan.

We were able to raid Perrian's subspace as Ian had hoped, and thanks to a heads-up, the guards avoided death.

The deputy warden was seriously injured, but I managed to get him out quickly, saving his life.

Of course, the destruction of the underground dungeon was a major problem.

We couldn't determine who among the prisoners had died or escaped, and managing the criminals that needed to be locked up was challenging.

However, a bigger problem awaited us.

“…Gone?"

The mana stone containing the powerful mana Ian had seen inside Perrian's subspace wasn't there.

Naturally, we expected to find the mana stone in the subspace, but there was no trace of it.

"Was the mana stone kept separately?"

"Let's keep looking for now. With so much stuff, it's possible we just haven't found it yet."

Despite being filled with enough items to fill a room, it was unlikely that more than five people looking would miss it.

If it were filled with mana, its presence would have been felt.

Yet, we didn't feel such strong mana here.

We searched the room several times over, as Ian suggested.

"Ian Astria. Shall we stop now? If we haven't found it after all this, it probably means it's not here."

When Rie spoke to Ian, he sighed and nodded.

"Alright. Let's start by organizing the information we have here."

It was only after Ian said this that some degree of organization began.

The people who had been searching for the mana stone left, leaving me, Rie, and Ian at the site.

The three of us read through the documents Perrian had collected and analyzed the magical tools he had been trying to create.

After a while,

Rie yawned, feeling stiff.

Then she looked at me and spoke.

"I've skimmed through it, but I still don't really understand."

"Understanding this could help us understand Perrian's plans."

"That's true. But still, that mana stone is the most important thing, right?"

At Rie's words, I nodded, and Ian added,

"Even if that mana stone were only used to cause an explosion, it could blow up the capital. So, taking this amplifier doesn't mean it's all over."

"Hmm…"

I read through Perrian's documents while listening to Ian.

"Shouldn't we hurry and catch Perrian then?"

"If attack too strongly, we don't know what the other side will do. It's better to assess the situation slowly first."

Hearing that, I looked at Ian.

"Is it because of the possibility that Perrian might detonate the mana stone in the capital?"

"Yes, imagine if the mana stone were to explode in the capital. Some people might survive, but would the rebels just stand by?"

The attack of the rebels following the disappearance of the capital.

An unprepared fortress and soldiers without a command structure would not stand a chance against the rebels.

"Couldn't we stop the explosion? Like, using spatial magic to send the mana stone flying when it's about to explode."

"The opponent is the head of the Astria family. Do you think he would not have thought of that?"

Rie looked at us with a dumbfounded face.

"Then we'll need a strategy to win them over."

"If that were possible, we would not be going through all this trouble…"

The opponent was someone who holds a ducal title.

What could be offered to such a person to make them listen.

"That doesn't mean there's no chance at all."

I tilted my head at Ian's words.

"My father is already like a cornered rat. If we leave him be, he would bite us."

"It's a plan years in the making. He must have wanted something to have devised such a plan. If the mana stone explodes, his plan would crumble overnight. Do you think he would make such a choice just because the amplifier is gone?"

It was a valid point.

"First, we find out my father's plan. We can decide what to do after that."

"Ha… Alright."

With that, we began to go through Perrian's documents one by one.

After several hours of reading, the plan gradually became clear.

"What is this?"

Rie frowned, indicating her displeasure.

She was holding a plan.

"Taking everyone in the capital hostage?"

That was what the document contained.

Taking everyone hostage.

But it didn't stop there.

Taking everyone in every castle, every domain within the empire hostage.

That was Perrian's plan.

“…This isn't just taking hostages."

Ian joined in.

I nodded in agreement.

"It's not just hostages; he plans to make slaves of the entire empire."

Perrian installs an amplifier in the capital.

Then, using the mana emanating from there, he takes the entire capital hostage.

Using those hostages, he creates something similar to the mana stone installed in the capital and installs it in other castles as well.

This is how he plans to take the entire empire hostage.

However, these people aren't just hostages but slaves because they are being exploited.

The magic Perrian intended to inscribe on the mana stone was…

"Life Drain."

A necromancy spell that absorbs the mana, the life force of others, and converts it into one's own life force.

It's a spell that those who sought eternal life in the past used.

However, the problem with this spell was that one had to be stronger.

One had to defeat someone and absorb their life force.

So, those who sought eternal life through this method were killed by someone stronger than themselves.

Perrian intended to eliminate this risk.

A magical tool that could exploit the life force of others at will.

A spell that could steal a person's life force just by entering the range of the magical tool.

That was Perrian's plan.

"Damn it…”

Perrian was sitting, seething with anger.

All his collected data and the results had been stolen.

If he had the documents, he could have simply secluded himself and remade everything from scratch, but without them, he had no choice but to worry.

"Starting over from scratch…"

That was madness.

The documents Perrian had accumulated began when he was in his twenties.

Back then, he was healthy, and his mind was quick.

The current aged Perrian was in a different league.

With his ducal title gone and his body aging, starting the research over would only lead to him aging to death.

All Perrian had was the mana stone created with necromancy and his physical body.

He had to somehow come up with a plan.

Whether that meant retrieving the amplifier that had been stolen from him.

Or thinking of a different application for the mana stone.

He had to do something.

The first thing that came to Perrian's mind was the rebels.

Using the rebels to retrieve the amplifier.

Or, having the rebels create an amplifier.

But he couldn't proceed with such a plan.

Perrian was practically the enemy of all necromancers at this point.

The high ranks of the rebels had deep connections with necromancers, so he couldn't just approach them carelessly.

In the past, his ducal title meant the rebels couldn't touch him lightly, but in his current state, he would just be captured by them.

The chances of being robbed of the mana stone by them and killed were high.

However, Perrian had no other choice.

The only thing he could do alone was to threaten others with the mana stone.

But doing such a thing would only ensure his survival at best.

If he had wanted to live an ordinary life, he wouldn't have chosen this path to begin with.

It was a gamble he made, even risking the ducal seat he once held.

The dice had already been cast, so there was only one decision for Perrian to make.

"I will… sit at the highest position."

He wouldn't back down.

He intended to proceed with his plan as planned.

Even if it meant bearing the risks of allying with the rebels.

Perrian immediately wrote a letter.

Perrian, had used the rebels' distribution network when he provided them with mana stones made by necromancers.

He had received help from the rebels to transport mana stones from the Astria domain to where the amplifier was being made.

He could have used a normal distribution network, but he didn't want to risk ordinary people coming into contact with necromancers.

Furthermore, if mana stones continued to be transported from the Astria domain, which had no mines, people would become suspicious.

To avoid such risks, Perrian maintained his connection with the rebels.

After sending the letter to the rebels, Perrian stroked his chin.

'Now that I think about it, those guys… their situation has been pretty bad lately, hasn't it?'

The rebels had suffered a significant defeat against the Royal army and recently had been lying low, showing no signs of movement.

Then, could it be possible that they didn't know about the necromancers?

The Astria domain is quite far from where the rebels are located.

If they hadn't been keeping an eye, they might not know about the necromancers.

He also found out quite late that the necromancers had been killed by Robert.

'Maybe I can still take the initiative?'

Rumors about the necromancers hadn't spread at all in the capital.

People in high positions might know, but he wondered if such news had reached the rebels.

If the rebels had a way to obtain such high-level information, they wouldn't have suffered a major defeat against the Royal army.

"There's still a chance."

Perrian muttered to himself, clenching his fist.

Deep in the forest, where not even the moonlight could penetrate through the trees, making it impossible to see even an inch ahead, two men walked into such a forest.

They recognized each other's presence and stopped.

One of the men spoke.

"Perrian Astria. It's been a long time."

"Isn't this the first time we've met? Aryandor."

"I've seen you from a distance."

Perrian and Aryandor smiled at each other.

CHAPTER 249
PAST AND FUTURE (16)

"So, what brings someone of your rank to sit with us today?"

Aryandor asked with a smile.

Perrian frowned at Aryandor's words.

"Does it sound like I'm mocking you? If so, I apologize."

Perrian scrutinized Aryandor's expression.

It was hard to tell what he was thinking.

"How much do you know?"

Perrian asked directly.

Staying any longer would benefit neither of them.

"I am aware that you were captured and that you escaped from the dungeon."

"Then, this will be quick. How about forming an alliance?"

"An alliance?"

Aryandor's expression hardened.

"An alliance with you, who has lost everything?"

"I haven't lost everything. I still have the mana stones created by necromancy. You're not exactly in perfect condition either, are you?"

"Our damages are not beyond repair. How bad is your situation if you've come to us?"

Aryandor scoffed at Perrian. Under normal circumstances, Perrian would have stormed off, but he was in a position of need.

The rebels could benefit from having Perrian, but they wouldn't be at a loss without him.

But Perrian wasn't one to back down easily.

"Have you forgotten that I have necromancers at my command?"

Perrian gambled. He didn't know the exact condition of the necromancers.

The royal family was aware of the necromancers, so he was reluctant to go to their location.

Yet, with no rumors spreading, he aimed to exploit the information gap.

"Necromancers, you say…"

Aryandor stroked his chin, staring intently at Perrian.

"You wouldn't want to see them all die, would you?"

Perrian smiled. The rebels had an unusually strong obsession with necromancers.

It could be because they had a necromancer among their leadership, but the obsession seemed deeper.

"Let's start by handing over the necromancers,"

Aryandor said with utter seriousness, unaware of the necromancers' situation.

"Necromancy is my last weapon. Do you think I'd hand it over easily?"

"Hmm… What do you want?"

Aryandor took the bait.

"Ian Astria. He must be captured."

"Ian Astria?"

"A subspace created with spatial magic was robbed. He's the only one who knows how to use spatial magic, so he must have the items."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes. He took the items…"

"No, I mean, are you saying Ian Astria is the only one capable of using spatial magic?"

At Aryandor's words, Perrian narrowed his eyes.

"What are you implying?"

"Don't you have two sons?"

"Ah, you mean Rudy Astria? That kid…"

Perrian was about to dismiss the idea but then his expression wrinkled.

'Rudy can use spatial magic?'

Now that he thought about it, it was indeed strange.

The theft of the subspace had occurred during the chaos in the underground dungeon.

It was likely that when the amplifier was placed in the subspace, its coordinates were checked, and the items were taken.

Could Ian Astria have accessed the subspace during the disturbance in the dungeon?

Ian was a commander of the Royal forces.

If there had been a commotion in the dungeon, he should have been commanding people outside of it.

Could he really have slipped away to where the amplifier was hidden during that time?

It wasn't entirely impossible, but there were definitely awkward points.

"I think Rudy Astria is responsible for this. What do you think?"

It had been only about two weeks since Rudy had come to him asking to learn spatial magic.

At that time, he had known nothing.

And now, he was already using spatial magic?

Perrian pondered and then realized something.

The amplifier.

How had they managed to take the amplifier?

Ian knew about the necromancers but not about the amplifier.

Perrian had avoided going directly to that place to keep the existence of the amplifier a secret.

He had kept its location hidden by handling documents and had only recently visited the place once using spatial magic.

That was at the mansion he used with Rudy.

"Ah…! That was it."

"So, our goals align to some extent."

Aryandor smiled and looked at Perrian.

"Our target is Rudy Astria. How you handle him is of no concern to us. If you promise to kill him, we'll offer you our full support."

"Oh? And what does this support entail?"

"We'll send one of our leaders to you, along with a magical device created with time magic."

Perrian grinned.

The rebel soldiers, mostly untrained commoners, were no match for the Royal army, but their leadership was a different story.

Even the deceased Jefrin and the necromancer Daemon had remarkable abilities, making one wonder how they were recruited.

"Understood. I'll send you the meeting location separately."

"Then, I look forward to our meeting after this matter is resolved."

Aryandor and Perrian shook hands and returned to their respective places.

"Thank you for the information on necromancy. It really helped progress things."

A man sat in front of the empire's head wizard, Franz.

"It was nothing."

It was Robert.

Though both were disciples of Levian, they weren't close. Robert wasn't one to foster friendships, so they merely knew of each other.

Yet, their current meeting was due to necromancy.

"I shared information about Ephomos as a form of repayment for your help with necromancy."

Ephomos.

A few months ago, Robert had investigated Ephomos while traveling to the Railer domain with Rudy.

The person who had provided the mercenaries with information on Robert's behalf was none other than the head wizard, Franz.

From there, the two formed a cooperative relationship.

Franz provided information on necromancers and their investigations, while Robert personally visited the scene.

Given his position as a head wizard, which didn't allow for much freedom of movement, Franz had utilized Robert for these tasks.

"Your student thought I was the one using time magic. You could have given him a hint that we were working together."

"Why should I report every little thing to him? He's not my superior. He'll figure it out on his own."

"Thanks to your student, things went smoothly. He's exceptionally talented in magic. To learn spatial magic in such a short time…"

"Talent? It's just a coincidence."

"If such coincidences keep happening, they're not coincidences but inevitabilities. Isn't he making a name for himself at the academy? That must be the level of a genius."

"Genius, my foot. The kid is anything but a genius."

One would expect Robert to be pleased by such praise for his student, but he showed no sign of it.

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes, the world doesn't call someone a genius just because ordinary people can't understand them. He's just a fool who works harder than others and doesn't know how to compromise with himself."

"Hmm…"

From the listener's perspective, this sounded more valuable than being called a genius. It acknowledged the person's effort, not just their talent.

"Anyway, setting Rudy aside, why have you come all of a sudden?"

It was unusual for Robert to make such a visit.

Originally, he had been cautious about his research on necromancy being discovered, but it was also because of his personality, which didn't favor face-to-face discussions.

"You saw Levian's last moments, didn't you?"

"Nobody saw his last moments. Even those in the Railer domain said they didn't see it."

"I'm talking about before that. Before he went to the Railer domain."

"I was nearby then."

"What expression was he wearing at that time?"

"Hmm… expression… That's difficult."

It felt like the disappearance of Ephomos was just yesterday, but it had been nearly 20 years since that event.

It was hard to recall an expression from that time.

"If you can't remember, that's fine."

"No, I do remember vaguely."

Franz had been close to Levian, almost like a star pupil.

He had a faint memory of his master's last appearance.

"Very sad… No, it was a complex expression. A mix of sadness and regret? Something like that."

"Sad, huh…”

As Robert pondered this with a stroke of his chin, Franz let out a resigned laugh.

"Did you come all this way just to ask that?"

"I dropped by to ask that, among other things, and to see how you're doing. It wouldn't hurt for fellow disciples to check in on each other."

"It's funny hearing that from you. So, that's all you came for?"

"Not entirely."

With that, Robert handed him an envelope.

"What's this?"

"Just some information I've gathered that might be needed."

Franz looked at the envelope with a curious expression.

"Should I open it now?"

"No."

"Huh… well, then. When should I open it?"

Robert stood up from his seat.

"You'll know when."

CHAPTER 250
PAST AND FUTURE (17)

Taking Perrian's belongings and figuring out his intentions was a good start.

"But if we don't know where the guy is, it's all meaningless."

"Even if we find out, there's nothing we can do. What's the point of knowing now?"

Rie responded to my grumbling.

Rie, Ian, and I were analyzing Perrian's data, trying to predict his next move.

While the head wizard and others continued to track Perrian, they hadn't made any significant progress.

I looked over at Ian, who was still reading through the documents beside me.

"What do you think will happen now?"

"If I knew that, we wouldn't be in this situation."

"You've been by my father's side for years; you must have some idea."

"Yes, I do know that he won't give up that easily."

"Hmm…"

"He'll show up soon, whether to take back the amplifier from us or for some other purpose."

"What other purpose?"

Rie questioned Ian's statement.

"Revenge on those who messed up his plans. That's all I can think of right now."

"Isn't there a chance he's making another amplifier?"

"My father is nearly 60, without a dukedom, and the surrounding environment isn't favorable. It's unlikely."

"So, you're saying he will appear before us one way or another."

Then Ian was the most at risk.

Perrian harbored the greatest grudge against him, and since Perrian didn't know I could use spatial magic, he would assume Ian had the amplifier.

He would target Ian for some reason.

"It might be wise for you to lay low for a while."

"There's no need for that. Even if my father appears before me, I'm stronger than him. Plus, I'm in a place where the Royal army is gathered, so a surprise attack isn't possible."

"Still, it doesn't hurt to be cautious."

"Don't worry about me. Worry about yourselves. No one knows who he'll target."

"Yes, understood."

"Speaking of which, it's getting late."

The sun was setting, and it was time to return.

"Are you staying here any longer?"

"No, we should be heading back too."

"Rudy, how about having dinner at the palace?"

I shook my head at Rie's question.

"I need to practice spatial magic when I return, and I study some other things."

"If that's what you want…”

Rie was disappointed, which was unusual for her.

Typically, she would have insisted, but her easy surrender left me feeling uneasy.

"Rudy, how about staying at the royal palace?"

"What?"

Ian's sudden suggestion took me by surprise.

"The Astria mansion is empty; isn't that dangerous? There's no one there to protect you, and the security is inadequate. The royal palace would be safer, wouldn't it?"

Rie's eyes sparkled at Ian's suggestion.

"You actually make sense for once."

"When have I ever spoken nonsense?"

"Staying at the palace, huh…”

"There's plenty of room in the palace for magic research, right? And if you ever need anything, you can always ask the royal wizards or someone else."

It was a good idea.

It was safe, and it would be beneficial for my magic studies.

It might be a bit of an imposition, but when it comes to saving one's life, a little inconvenience is acceptable.

Even though Ian was most likely to be targeted, there was still a chance I could be targeted too.

If the details of what happened became known, it would definitely come back to me.

Ian might have planned it, but I was the one who carried it out.

"Then I'll go back to the mansion to pack some of my things."

"Great! Then I'll tell them to prepare a meal at the palace!"

Rie, delighted, spoke with an energetic smile.

"I'll head back then. Both of you, take care. If it gets dangerous, I'll come right away, so just stay alive."

After Ian left, I too returned to the mansion to pack my belongings.

"Ah… staying at the royal palace for a while…"

"So, you should take a break and leave only a few people to manage the mansion."

"A break? But it's our job to manage things here."

I planned to send all the mansion's staff on a break.

If things went wrong while I was at the royal palace, Perrian could come looking and harm people.

With no one staying at the mansion, two or three people could manage it, so there was no need to keep everyone here.

"I'll pay your salaries as usual, so take a break. You must be worried with everything that has been happening recently."

Given the war between the empire and the rebels, they surely had concerns about their hometowns.

I thought this would be a good opportunity for them to see their families and reduce their worries.

"Thank you… We'll discuss amongst ourselves who will stay and let you know."

I nodded at the maid's words.

"Then I'll also pack your belongings."

"Oh, yes. Thank you."

I smiled at the maid and went down to my study.

The maids said they would take care of my clothes and other items, but I had to pack the magic-related items myself.

"Is this enough…"

I packed only the most essential items.

If I needed more, I could always come back briefly.

The royal palace wasn't far from the Astria mansion.

"Once the remaining staff is decided, I'll send a letter."

"Alright, everyone, take a good rest."

I bid farewell to everyone and boarded the carriage.

"Shall we head to the palace?"

"Yes."

The coachman drove towards the palace following my command.

As I felt the carriage went on its way, I heard the coachman's voice from outside.

"…Hm?"

"Is there a problem?"

Crash!

What followed wasn't the coachman's voice but the sound of the carriage jolting.

"Ugh!"

The carriage suddenly tried to stop, and I was thrown forward.

Thud!

I fell forward, hitting my head against the front wall of the carriage.

"Ugh…”

I tried to get up, placing my hands on the floor, and opened my mouth to speak.

"What happened…”

Crash!!!

Suddenly, there was a sound of something tearing apart.

The top part of the carriage was being sliced open.

"What?"

The roof of the carriage was cleanly sliced off.

Had I not fallen forward, my head would have been where the cut was made.

"Damn…”

Without a moment's hesitation, I leaped out of the carriage.

Crash— Bang!

Just as I suspected, the carriage was cut in half.

I muttered to myself while looking at the scene.

"Perrian…”

He was the only one who would ambush me like this.

But the nature of the attack was the problem.

A sword strike?

It was impossible for Perrian to use a sword strike.

Sword strikes were the exclusive domain of swordsmen.

Though it's possible to mimic something similar with wind magic, that was clearly a sword strike.

I looked towards where the sword strike had come from.

"What were you planning to do if you killed him? Killing that guy isn't enough. You need to steal the item."

"My goal is to kill him."

"We're allies for now. Your goal is my goal."

There stood two people.

One was Perrian Astria.

The other, a swordsman wielding a massive sword.

"Venderwood…?"

A leader of the rebels and someone I had defeated in a different future.

The swordsman with the great sword was Venderwood.

Hearing my words, Perrian looked at me.

"Rudy, it's been a long time."

"Long time my ass. Your greeting with a sword strike was well received, so spare me your bullsh*t."

I cursed at Perrian, who was smiling, and took my stand.

"You tricked me nicely. Spatial magic. You can use it, can't you?"

I scanned the surroundings.

It didn't seem like there were other people around, but Venderwood in front of me was the problem.

If it were my future self, I could easily defeat him.

But if you ask whether I can beat him now, I can't give a definitive answer.

And with Perrian there too?

Victory was impossible.

Unable to properly use spatial magic, there was no way I could take on both of them at the same time.

"No answer to father's question, huh?"

"Is someone trying to kill their son really a father? You're just a beast. No, even beasts don't kill their offspring. You're worse than a beast."

"Heh, you do have a way with words."

Perrian reached out his hand towards me.

"Whether you can use spatial magic or not, we'll see in a fight."

The space started to shift.

I quickly judged the movement.

Perrian was attempting spatial severance.

I threw myself to the side.

Then, the place where I had been standing cracked.

Space split open, creating a black rift in the surroundings.

"So, you can sense the spatial domain to some extent."

I calmly took a deep breath.

Joining forces with the rebels, they came looking for me after hearing I could use spatial magic.

"Are you planning to demand the amplifier?"

"Oh, you're more reasonable than I thought."

Perrian stepped forward.

"Hand over the amplifier, and I'll grant you a painless death."

I let out a hollow laugh.

"Not even offering to spare my life, but promising death if I hand it over? Why would I just give it to you?"

"Is that so? Then it seems you'll need to lose an arm or a leg before you hand it over."

At Perrian's words, Venderwood stepped forward.

The towering figure, over 2 meters tall, wielding a great sword, exerted immense pressure.

"Don't kill him."

"Understood."

Venderwood nodded.

"Haah…"

It was clear that I couldn't win against both of them at the same time.

So, there was only one thing to do.

Hold out.

Since the Astria mansion and the royal palace are close, if I don't show up, Rie will notice.

Surely reinforcements will come.

I just need to hold out until then.

"30 minutes…”

Just close my eyes and hold out for 30 minutes.

Just 30 minutes.

Thinking this, I began to manipulate my mana.

CHAPTER 251
PAST AND FUTURE (18)

Venderwood rapidly approached, wielding his greatsword.

Despite his large size, his speed was impressive. I dodged to the side and extended my hand.

"Flames of the Abyss."

I aimed for his arm.

Venderwood, with fluid motion, sliced through the flames.

"Spatial Severance."

As he cut through the flames, Perrian unleashed his magic.

I threw myself to the side, attempting to avoid Perrian's spell, but Venderwood was already upon me.

Dodging both attacks at once was impossible.

"Priscilla!"

A silver wolf appeared in front of me.

Priscilla bit down on Venderwood's greatsword with her massive jaws.

"So, rolling around the academy has taught you well. However,"

Perrian began, manipulating mana as he spoke,

"you are only as good as a student."

Perrian reached down to the ground.

"Undead Rise."

Skeleton hands emerged from the ground, followed by dozens of skeletons.

"Behemoth."

As I chanted the incantation, a magic circle appeared on the ground, and a small elephant emerged.

Previously only reaching my knees, its magical growth now matched my height.

The Behemoth's trumpeting caused iron to burst from nearby carriages, flying towards the skeletons at its command.

"Hmm…"

Perrian, stroking his chin, let out an impressed gasp.

Priscilla blocking Venderwood and the Behemoth taking down the undead suggested I could maybe hold out for the 30 minutes.

"Bone Spear."

At Perrian's command, bones gathered and formed several bone spears around us.

These spears flew towards me, guided by Perrian's gestures.

"Hell's Thorns!"

Black pillars erupted from the ground, impaling the incoming spears.

"Spatial Severance."

Perrian cast another spell simultaneously.

I threw myself aside to dodge, rolling onto the sandy ground.

I saw Venderwood, previously obstructed by Priscilla, charging towards me.

"Damn it, Priscilla!"

I shouted her name as I rolled to the side.

"I know!"

Priscilla, using ice to grasp Venderwood's ankle, charged towards his shoulder.

Despite her efforts, her magic couldn't stop his advance.

I had thought her attack would impede him, but the sound of bone and flesh crushing under Priscilla's bite filled the air.

Venderwood hadn't blocked her teeth; even as his shoulder was torn away, flesh and bone ripping, he continued his charge towards me.

"Ah…”

I was reminded of Venderwood's ability.

His form, enduring even when mirroring my future self, flickered in my mind.

Despite injuries or being torn into dozens of pieces, he possessed a regenerative ability that allowed him to recover.

Then…

Thud!

"Ugh!"

I was kicked squarely by Venderwood as he charged at me.

Lying on the ground, the impact of his kick sent me flying.

Venderwood raised his sword, intending to strike me while I was airborne.

"Damn it… Behemoth!"

"Roar!"

The Behemoth undermined the ground beneath Venderwood's feet as he swung his

sword towards me.

The earth split open, causing Venderwood to lose his balance.

Clutching his sword, he glanced down at the Behemoth.

Venderwood immediately pushed off the ground.

"Roar!"

Thud!

Venderwood moved swiftly, reaching the Behemoth in an instant, and swung his sword at the creature's body.

The powerful swing split the Behemoth's belly.

The Behemoth vanished like smoke.

Though it was a summoned creature and wouldn't truly die, the reduction in our fighting force was problematic.

Venderwood, having cut down the Behemoth, lifted his sword and looked towards me again.

The shoulder Priscilla had bitten began to heal slowly, returning to its original state.

"Rudy, are you okay?"

Priscilla helped me up from where I had fallen on the ground.

It felt like I had a rib or two knocked out of place from Venderwood's kick, but with body reinforcement, I figured I could manage to hold on.

"As long as it doesn't turn into a war of attrition, I think we can hold out."

If we press the enemy and both sides start accumulating damage and fatigue, we're at a significant disadvantage.

They have skeletons to expend at will and even a swordsman who heals himself.

A war of attrition would clearly be in their favor.

And they knew it as well as we did.

Our plans would not go as intended.

Venderwood charged at me again, a reckless dash.

"Priscilla, I'll leave him to you."

I asked Priscilla to take care of Perrian and stepped forward.

I could see Venderwood charging at me.

He is undoubtedly strong.

But in close combat, I am not inferior.

"I'll dodge everything."

There's no way to conserve energy.

Minimizing injuries was crucial.

I charged towards Venderwood as he came at me.

Unfazed, Venderwood swung his sword broadly.

I ducked slightly, avoiding the greatsword, and moved inside Venderwood's guard.

In close quarters, fists are more advantageous than a greatsword.

I drove into Venderwood, striking his abdomen.

"Ugh."

I felt his ribs break under my hand.

I didn't stop there and continued to strike.

Concentrating mana in my hand, I hit what are considered important spots.

Thump, thump, thump—

Such blows would turn an ordinary person into mush.

A punch filled with mana could shatter hard steel.

Yet, Venderwood neither fell nor was sent flying.

He merely stepped back slightly, enduring the hits.

Even if his body continued to heal, it didn't lessen the severity of the pain and impact.

Despite this, Venderwood withstood it.

"Gasp!"

Venderwood, despite being hit by my strikes, slammed the hilt of his greatsword towards me.

I quickly stepped back to avoid the blow.

As I moved back, Venderwood swung his sword, sending a wave of dark energy towards me.

"Ugh!"

Caught while retreating, I had no time to fully evade.

I raised my arm in an attempt to block Venderwood's sword strike.

The strike sliced through my arm. Though my arm was filled with mana and thus not severed, it left a deep gash.

"Rudy!"

I heard Priscilla's voice at that moment.

Bone spears appeared before my eyes.

"Damn!"

Caught off guard by Venderwood, Perrian's attack followed.

I had thought Priscilla would handle Perrian, but she was overwhelmed.

I had to make a quick decision.

I couldn't block all the spears.

Could I throw myself elsewhere?

Doing so would just invite Venderwood to charge at me again.

There was only one option left.

"Teleport!"

I tried to use spatial magic to escape elsewhere.

"So, you do know how to use spatial magic."

"Ah."

I tried to leave the area, but the magic failed to activate.

It was as if the spatial domain had frozen, immobilizing me.

The spears pierced my arms and body.

Intense pain engulfed me.

"Ugh…"

I gasped out in pain.

"Not much to you, after all."

"Rudy!"

Priscilla rushed to my front, shielding me.

Perrian, mocking Priscilla, walked up to me.

"Finally thinking of fetching the amplifier?"

"Damn… The spatial magic…”

"Didn't Ian tell you? Spatial magic users can block each other's magic."

Ian's words came back to me.

He hadn't suggested using spatial magic to escape when Perrian attacked.

He said he would come for me.

Ian knew I couldn't escape.

"Just… tell me properly… Damn…”

I cursed, barely standing.

My body was covered in blood.

The blood loss made my head spin, and my body felt cold.

Focusing was difficult.

Mana wouldn't flow properly.

"Are you going to keep fighting? With that body? Or, are you waiting for someone else?"

Perrian taunted me.

"You can't do anything alone. Pathetic."

His taunt wasn't wrong.

I've always depended on others, surviving by being together.

"So what?"

"What?"

"I live by playing my part within a group."

"The weak always say that. And their end always comes when they're separated from the group."

Perrian laughed at my words.

"How could someone like you even be compared to Ian? I don't get it. Ian's betrayal is trouble, but you're just scum. How could you possibly be from the Astria family…"

As Perrian continued his rant.

"…Huh?"

"You talk too much."

A blade was visible in Perrian's chest.

A sword had pierced through him.

It was Venderwood's sword.

Venderwood's greatsword had pierced through Perrian's chest.

"…What?"

"Cough… Ugh… What is this…?"

"Aryandor ordered the killing of Rudy Astria when he was almost captured."

"Ah… Aryand… Cough…"

He couldn't speak properly, likely because his lung was pierced.

Venderwood pulled the sword from his chest.

Then, Perrian collapsed to the ground.

"Aryandor wanted me to convey this."

Venderwood spoke to Perrian, lying on the ground.

"This is revenge against Ephomos and the necromancers."

CHAPTER 252
PAST AND FUTURE (19)

Venderwood stared intently at Perrian, who lay defeated on the ground.

"Ugh… ugh…”

Perrian, still conscious, gasped for air.

"Where's the mana stone then? The one created by the necromancers."

"Ugh…”

While they exchanged words, I assessed the situation.

With Perrian down, the restrictions on spatial magic were lifted.

Yet, I couldn't use spatial magic.

Lacking experience, I couldn't focus properly to use it without concentration.

Bleeding profusely and the throbbing pain from the wound where the spear had pierced made it impossible to concentrate properly.

Standing was all I could manage at my best.

"I'll ask again. The mana stone. Where is it?"

"You think… you can survive… after this…? Cough…”

Perrian barked out, coughing up blood.

"Still got a lively mouth."

Venderwood pressed his foot down on Perrian.

"Ugh… haha…"

Perrian let out a rough breath and chuckled.

Then, a strong mana presence was felt.

Venderwood, sensing something odd, stepped back.

"What's this?"

The strong presence of mana was unmistakable.

It was impossible for such mana to emanate from someone dying.

Perrian pushed himself off the ground to stand.

A bright light pierced through his clothes from his chest.

A glowing object, pierced by the sword through his clothes, was faintly visible.

"The mana stone?"

The mana stone was embedded in his chest.

It was the very mana stone we had been searching for.

"Did you think… I would fall just like that?"

The wound on his chest slightly healed.

Life Drain.

He had embedded the mana stone in his own chest, using his body as a magical tool.

"You think I came unprepared?"

Perrian looked at Venderwood with a faint smile.

Venderwood narrowed his eyes, pointing his sword at Perrian.

"What do you plan to do in that state?"

"You, you have a regenerating body."

Perrian reached out towards Venderwood.

A red glow leaked from his eyes.

"I'll take some of that vitality."

Perrian lunged at Venderwood with a push from the ground.

Venderwood swung his sword at the approaching Perrian.

"What's happening here?"

I watched the situation bewilderedly.

Priscilla nudged me.

"Rudy, they're fighting. Now's our chance to escape."

I was doubtful of Priscilla's suggestion.

Is it right for me to run away here?

Can I even escape?

"No, I'll watch for now."

"What? Are you crazy?"

"Their primary target isn't each other. It's me."

It wasn't a matter of whether to run or not.

If I ran, I'd die.

There was no escape.

Even if I tried to escape on Priscilla, Venderwood would catch us.

All I could do was wait for someone to come.

Then, a strong wind blew towards me.

The pressure from Venderwood's sword strike caused a gust of wind.

"Ugh…”

I shielded myself from the wind with my arms and watched their fight.

The battle was one-sided.

Perrian was a wizard, and Venderwood a swordsman.

Normally, Perrian would maintain distance, while Venderwood would charge in, but the situation was reversed.

Perrian tried to grab Venderwood to use Life Drain, but Venderwood dodged and countered with sword strikes.

Severely wounded and forced into close combat, Perrian was at a disadvantage.

"You…!"

Perrian staggered, shouting at Venderwood.

"What's an old man with a pierced chest trying to do, flailing like that?"

"I won't forgive you. I won’t forgive…!"

Perrian was desperate.

Despite his efforts, he couldn't even touch Venderwood.

Even using spatial and necromancy magic, he couldn't catch Venderwood's movements.

Meanwhile, the light from the mana stone grew stronger.

As Perrian's condition worsened, the mana stone's light intensified.

I narrowed my eyes at this sight.

Crack!

"Agh!!!"

Then, Venderwood's sword struck Perrian squarely in the stomach.

Perrian flew back, tumbling to the ground, while Venderwood stared down at him.

"Let's end this now."

I kept watching.

Something was off.

As Perrian's wounds deepened, the mana stone's light grew stronger.

Yet, the mana stone did not provide any other benefit.

It didn't appear to increase mana or heal wounds.

Then, Ian's words came to mind.

'If that mana stone explodes in the capital, it would obliterate the city.'

"Ha ha…"

Despite the dire situation, Perrian smiled.

Even with severe injuries and unable to fight back.

"Priscilla…!"

"Understood."

Priscilla, sensing my intention, immediately moved.

"What are you doing?"

Priscilla blocked Venderwood, who was approaching Perrian.

I spoke up.

"I have no love for that man, but killing him now is a bad idea."

"What?"

"The mana stone embedded in his chest. If he dies, it will explode."

Hearing this, Venderwood took a closer look at Perrian.

The mana stone's light was intensifying.

Normally, mana stones shine only when exerting power, not continuously.

This indicated the mana stone was activating.

If Perrian dies, the stone would explode.

It was a warning.

"Even if it heals most wounds, there's a limit, right? If you don't want to die, leave it be."

"Hmm…"

Perrian laughed maniacally.

"Ha ha ha! Yes, kill me and the mana stone explodes. Kill me and you all die. Go on, kill me! Ha ha ha… cough!"

At Perrian's words, Venderwood looked at me.

"You're right. But."

Venderwood approached Perrian without hesitation.

"I think I'd prefer to detonate this mana stone and destroy the capital."

"What?"

Venderwood was crazier than I had thought.

He prioritized the rebels' cause over his own life.

"Move aside."

Venderwood charged at Priscilla.

Priscilla summoned ice around her and launched it, but it was all swept away by Venderwood's sword.

"Priscilla!"

Priscilla tried to resist as much as she could, but couldn't muster much strength.

My mental energy was already depleting, preventing me from using any significant techniques.

Priscilla was sliced and sent flying to the side.

"Ha ha…?"

Venderwood passed Priscilla and reached right in front of Perrian.

"Then die."

"Ah… ah…"

Perrian, unable to even scream, tried to crawl away from Venderwood on the ground.

"Right, time magic…"

Perrian recalled something, rummaging through his pocket and pulling out a clock.

"If I use the time magic artifact…"

As Perrian touched the clock, a strong light leaked from it.

And then.

Boom!

A massive explosion erupted from the clock.

Shrapnel flew everywhere, and Perrian's head was gone.

That was Perrian's end.

"Did you really think it was a genuine time magic artifact?"

"Ah…"

I couldn't close my mouth upon seeing this.

It was a pitiful end, unbecoming of someone who had held a ducal title.

"The mana stone…"

Then, the mana stone began to emit an even stronger light.

"So, next is."

Venderwood, unconcerned with the mana stone, looked at me.

"You need to die as well."

"What? If that thing explodes…"

"It doesn't matter. We're all going to die anyway, but Lord Aryandor specifically said you should die by my hand. You're too much of a wildcard."

Venderwood walked towards me.

"Rudy…!"

Priscilla, who had been slashed by Venderwood, got up and charged at him again.

"Annoying."

Priscilla, unable to manipulate ice, was easily cut down by Venderwood.

"Pr, Priscilla… ack…”

As Priscilla was forcibly recalled, a sinking feeling overwhelmed me.

The cost of reverse summoning.

While creatures like Behemoths dying wouldn't exact a heavy toll, the reverse summoning of a spirit inflicts severe internal injuries.

My already poor condition worsened.

"So…”

I could see Venderwood approaching with his greatsword.

And in the distance, the mana stone ready to explode.

"…”

I couldn't do anything in that state.

Spatial magic.

Spirit magic.

Dark magic.

Martial arts.

I was incapable of any action.

Is this what it feels like when everything collapses and is lost?

"Ugh…”

I wanted to resist Venderwood with all my might, but my body refused to cooperate.

If things continued this way, everyone would die.

The people quietly living in the capital.

The nobles.

My acquaintances.

Everyone would die.

I clenched my fist.

This couldn't happen.

I must resist somehow.

Even if it meant squeezing out every last bit of mana from the ground.

I must think of some way.

However, no method came to mind.

All I could see was Venderwood approaching me.

I was powerless.

Just as Perrian had said, I was a weakling.

If there's no one around, I can't do anything.

"Ah…?"

Then, a sound came from Venderwood.

Thud.

I felt a sensation above my head.

White smoke appeared beside me, and the smell of tobacco stung my nose.

Boom!!!!!

A loud explosion sounded.

It was a really loud noise, but it wasn't from Perrian's mana stone.

I wasn't sure if I was crying, but my vision blurred.

After wiping my eyes with my sleeve, I could see ahead.

Somehow, Venderwood had been sent flying far away and was rolling on the ground.

As I stared blankly at that scene, a voice came from beside me.

"What are you, a kid? Stop your sniveling."

I turned my head to look beside me.

There was a man, Robert, with a white cigarette in his mouth and one hand resting above my head.

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